XI
Tearmoon Empire
Nozomu Mochitsuki
Illustrator: Gilse

XI
Tearmoon Empire
Nozomu Mochitsuki
Illustrator: Gilse

Characters

Tearmoon Empire

Miabel

Mia's future granddaughter who leapt backward through time. Goes by "Bel."

GRANDDAUGHTER AND GRANDMOTHER

Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. She successfully avoids a repeat encounter with the guillotine, but then Bel shows up...

The Four Dukes' Families

Ruby

The daughter of the Duke of Redmoon. A gallant lady with a wardrobe to match.

Citrina

The only daughter of the House of Yellowmoon. Bel's first friend.

Esmeralda

The eldest daughter of the House of Greenmoon. Self-proclaimed best friend of Mia.

Sapphias

The eldest son of the House of Bluemoon. Got into the student council thanks to Mia.

Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. Ardently believes in Mia and is trying to make her Empress.

Anne

Mia's maid. Born into a poor family of merchants. Mia's loyal subject.

ARCHNEMESIS

Dion

The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

※ ——— Future Timeline Relationship

※ ····· Previous Timeline Relationship

Outcount Rudolvon's Family

Cyril

Tiona's younger brother.
Super smart.

Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. Looks up to Mia. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army.

Revolution

Archnemesis

Assistance

Archnemesis

Kingdom of Sunkland

Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant.
A cynic. But a competent one.

Sion

Crown Prince. All-round genius. In the previous timeline he was Mia's archnemesis, aided Tiona and eventually became known as the "Penal King." In the present he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

[Wind Crows] Sunkland's intelligence service.

[White Crows] A team within the Wind Crows formed for a certain project.

Support

Holy Principality of Belluga

Support

Rafina

The Duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's student council president and the school's de facto decision maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

[Saint-Noel Academy]

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

Kingdom of Remno

Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he works to diligently improve his swordsmanship instead.

[Forkroad & Co.]

Chloe

The only heir of Marco Forkroad, whose company spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

Chaos Serpents

A group of chaosmongers trying to wreak havoc upon the world. They are deeply hostile toward the Holy Principality of Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church. Traces of their clandestine misdeeds can be found throughout history, but the details are shrouded in mystery.

Tearmoon Empire

Nina
Esmeralda's maid.

Balthazar
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Gilbert
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Musta
Head chef of the imperial court of the Tearmoon Empire.

Elise
Anne's younger sister and the second daughter of the Littstein family. Mia's court author.

Liora
Tiona's maid. Hails from the Lulu tribe who live in the forest. An expert archer.

Vanos
Dion's adjutant and former vice-captain of a hundred-man squad in Tearmoon's imperial army. A giant of a man.

Matthias
Mia's father. Tearmoon's emperor. Dotes on his daughter.

Adelaide
Mia's mother. Deceased.

Galv
An old wiseman and master to Ludwig.

Outcount Rudolvon
Father to Tiona and Cyril.

Equestrian Kingdom

Aima
Descendant of the Fire Clan. Mia's friend.

Malong
Mia's senior. Club leader of Saint-Noel Academy's Horsemanship Club.

Kuolan
A Moonhare. Mia's favorite horse.

Kingdom of Sunkland

Monica
A member of the White Crows. Infiltrated the Kingdom of Remno as an attendant to Abel.

Graham
A member of the White Crows. He is Monica's superior.

Merchants

Marco
Chloe's father. Head of Forkroad & Co.

Shalloak
A powerful merchant who sells all sorts of goods to kingdoms throughout the continent.

Kingdom of Remno

Lynsha
The daughter of a fallen noble family in Remno.

Lambert
Lynsha's older brother.

Perujin Agricultural Country

Rania
The third princess of Perujin. Mia's schoolmate.

Arshia
The second princess of Perujin. Rania's older sister.

Story

Mia, the reviled selfish princess of the fallen Tearmoon Empire, is executed, only to wake up a twelve-year-old again after somehow leaping backward through time. With this second chance at life she resolves to fix the ills that plague the Empire... so she doesn't end up at the guillotine again. With the help of her previous life's memories and a healthy dose of overly-generous interpretation of her actions by those around her, she successfully averts a revolution, only to be told by her time-leaping granddaughter, Bel, that in the future Mia's entire lineage will end in ruin and she herself will be assassinated. In order to avert this grisly fate, it seems necessary for her to become Tearmoon's first empress...

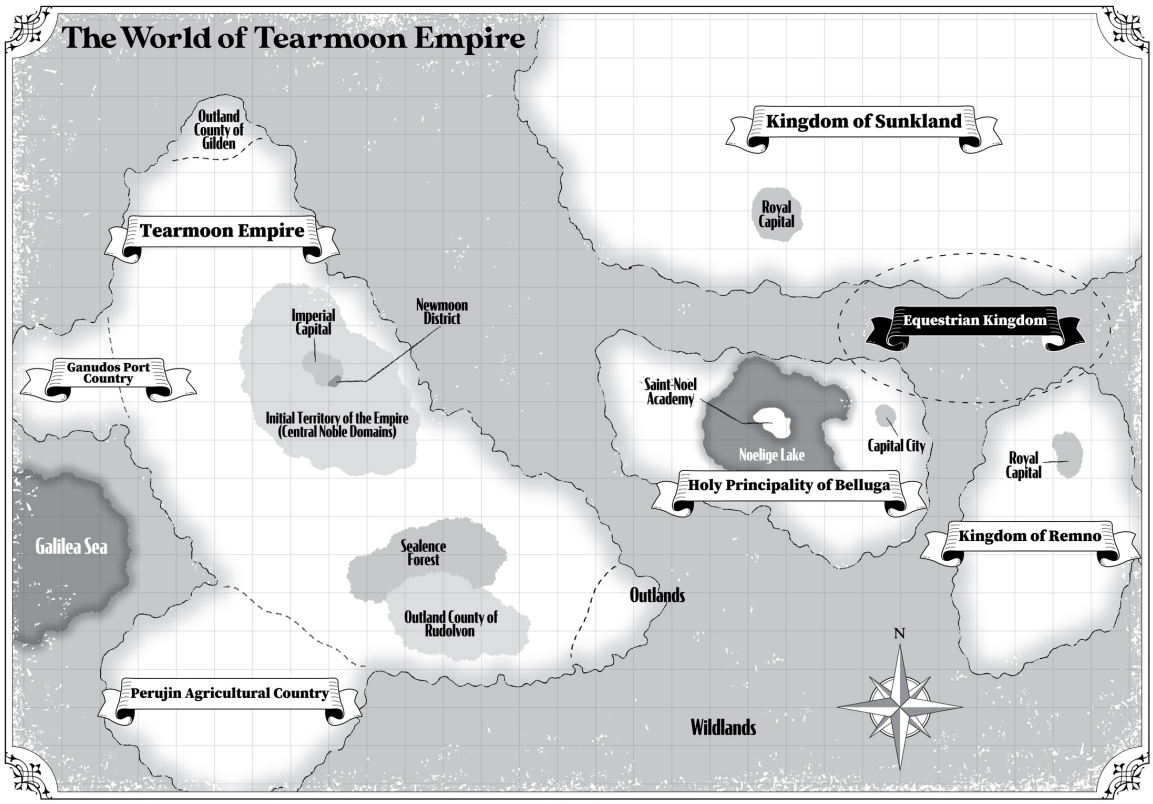

The World of Tearmoon Empire
Outland County of Gilden
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Equestrian Kingdom
Ganudos Port Country
Saint Noel Academy
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Noelige Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Holy Principality of Belluga
Galilea Sea
Sealence Forest
Kingdom of Remno
Outlands
Outland County of Rudolvon
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Characters

Map

Prologue: Bel's Three-Day Diary

Chapter 1: Our Hearts Are One...or Not

Chapter 2: The Empire's Horse Maniac Gives a Lecture!

Chapter 3: Anne's Small Act of Infidelity

Chapter 4: Headeth Onward, O Heavy-Armored Mia

Chapter 5: The Stupid Steed and the Sagacious Princess Become the Sagacious Steed and the Stupid Princess

Chapter 6: Princess Mia Is Perturbed

Chapter 7: Xiaolei Ingeniously Sees through Mia's Plan

Chapter 8: Mia Enjoys a Splash Fight of Shrieks and Giggles

Chapter 9: Mia's Rye (BLEEP) Bread

Chapter 10: Princess Mia Fails at Cajolery... Wait, She Fails?

Chapter 11: Like the End of a Wonderful Dream...

Chapter 12: The Sophisticated Calculations of the Great Sage

Chapter 13: Xiaolei's Pride

Chapter 14: The Absurd Theory of a Certain Chief...Spreadeth like Wildfyre!

Chapter 15: At the Ferocious Roar of Ye Princess, the Crowd Becometh Wilde
Chapter 16: The Verdict
Chapter 17: Atop the Winged Horse of Delusion
Chapter 18: Long-Awaited Connections
Chapter 19: Mia Bolsters Her Point
Chapter 20: The High Priestess and Citrina
Chapter 21: Blown About with Bated Breath
Chapter 22: Educated by a Certain Someone
Chapter 23: A Decision without Guidance
Chapter 24: Offense and Defense
Chapter 25: Touched by a Granddaughter's Growth
Chapter 26: Princess Mia Waves the Baton of Interjection
Chapter 27: Just What *Are* the Chaos Serpents?
Chapter 28: *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*
Chapter 29: Ludwig's Troubles
Chapter 30: Don't Let Your Guard Down! (Except Mia Kinda Does)
Chapter 31: The First Joint Effort
Chapter 32: Serpentine Malice
Chapter 33: The Ominous Mushroomless Forest
Chapter 34: To the Serpents' Castle
Chapter 35: Discourteous Kinship
Chapter 36: The Other Prince
Chapter 37: The Guiding Girl I —The Moon Shines Above the Imperial Capital—
Chapter 38: The Guiding Girl II —What Mia Must Do—
Chapter 39: Show Me! The Unfaltering Philosophy of Mia-First!

Chapter 40: In Creeps a Flawed World
Chapter 41: The Battle's End
Chapter 42: In Search of Mia-First
Epilogue: The Happy Dream Lives On
True Epilogue: Th-There's More?!
Individual Epilogues and...
Mia's Diary of Anticipation of Their Reunion
Afterword: "Fin"...or Not!
Character Interviews
Bonus Short Story
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Prologue: Bel's Three-Day Diary

The Southern Capital of the Equestrian Kingdom had deep ties with the Kingdom of Remno. Their close geographical locations led to prosperous exchange, the effects of which could be felt in different ways throughout the city. The ultimate example of this was the architecture—while the other clans lived mostly in tents to match their nomadic lifestyle, the buildings of the Southern Capital were primarily made of stone. In fact, the lodgings that had been assigned to Mia and her crew could easily be compared to the dorms at Saint-Noel's or the Whitemoon Palace in Tearmoon's capital.

Of course, there were differences too—the rooms were completely devoid of tables or chairs. Instead, a fluffy carpet was simply laid out on the floor, with furniture being mostly limited to small items that could easily be moved, perhaps a remnant from their previous nomadic age. On top of that carpet was a single girl, lying on her tummy and slovenly kicking her legs in the air. It was incredibly hard to believe this was really the princess of a mighty empire.

"Hmm... 'After we went to Sunkland, we went to the Equestrian Kingdom.' Right. 'We were attacked by bandits, and we met this girl with a wolf, and then...' Hmm... 'And then to bring the lost Fire Clan back together with the other twelve clans of the Equestrian Kingdom, Miss Mia attended the Meeting of Chieftains, and then...'" The girl—Bel—pushed the pen she held in her right hand to her lip and groaned. "I feel like I can write this better, but it *is* just a draft, so it might be fine..."

"Bel, what are you doing?" Citrina looked at Bel with utter confusion. She sat atop the carpet with the refined and flawless conduct fitting of a noble maiden, looking worlds apart from Bel's unruliness.

"Tee hee! I was thinking I'd write a diary!"

"A diary?" She gave Bel a blank stare, which Bel met with a smile.

"I heard Miss Mia was keeping a diary, so I decided I would write one too!" she said as she held out a bundle of papers. "She said she'd buy me a proper one once we return to Lunatear, so these are just notes! But Mr.

Ludwig also told me that keeping a diary would be good for my studies, so I'm going to try my best!" She scrunched her brow in thought. "But Miss Mia said something terrible, y'know! She said I would give up after just three days, so there was no point in buying me a diary. How mean! I do get bored easily, but three is far too short. I could go for as long as ten!"

Bel was puffing out her chest, but well...that really wasn't something to be proud of. Anyway...

"That's why I'm writing a draft. I want to prove that to Miss Mia! I'll show her that I can go for more than three days!"

"Oh, I see." Citrina went to glance at the stack of papers, but was quickly cut off.

"Ah! You can't, Rina! You're not supposed to show your diary to anyone else!" Bel hugged the papers to her chest, and then began to wag her finger with a smug grin. "Diaries are for reexamining your past self. Miss Mia showed me her diary, and inside was the proof! She kept detailed notes of even all the food she had to eat that day!" Bel laughed, looking both arrogant and somehow proud. But then her eyes lost focus. "I wonder if keeping a diary will one day mean I can be like Miss Mia..."

That question wasn't directed at Citrina, but to a far-off someone. However, she would never get an answer. Just as Mia had predicted, her diary only lasted three days. But it wasn't that she grew tired of it or lacked the perseverance. Instead, she...

Chapter 1: Our Hearts Are One...or Not

After finishing up with the Meeting of Chieftains, Mia met with Ludwig and the others to return to the lodgings of the Forest Clan, all the while gloating in her heart. *Oho ho! I was really quite something back there. There's a chance even that stupid four-eyes will praise me for my deep intellect!* There, she filled Ludwig and the other key members of her crew in on the proceedings.

"A Matching of Steeds, is it? And Your Highness plans to participate..." moaned Ludwig as he wrinkled his brow.

"Precisely. As I understand it, it's a two-day long-distance horse race."

The race would start at the Southern Capital and end at a place known as Stargrass Rock. *That* was the Matching of Steeds.

"I see... It's uncertain whether Her Highness will be able to best a Mountain Clan rider. In which case, logic states that the best solution would be to lose under the most favorable of circumstances possible. Yet..." Before Mia had time to offer an explanation, Ludwig had predicted her thoughts perfectly. However, his statement appeared to somewhat end in negation. This began to weigh on Mia's mind, but before she could follow up on it, Ludwig let out a sigh. "No matter the circumstance, procuring a convoy is in order. I'll have the Princess Guard begin with preparations immediately." He glanced at their member in attendance.

"I don't believe there's a need for such extreme security. I hear that the Equestrian Kingdom will be supplying their own guards. But well, they appear to be more referees than guards..."

Mia took a moment to recall earlier events. Once the Meeting of Chieftains was over, a burly chief had suddenly approached her.

"Princess Mia. I express my deepest gratitude to your suggestion, courage, and sympathy for our Equestrian Kingdom," he had said. "Those of my clan will diligently guard you during the Matching. Should the Mountain Clan try anything, we will be sure to protect you."

"Oh? Is that so?"

Seeing Mia's confusion, the chief politely explained the situation—the Equestris viewed the Matching of Steeds as something both incredibly strict and incredibly sacred. Thus, not just one, but *three* different clans sent two representatives each to act as watchmen so as to ensure there was no subterfuge at play, constantly sticking to both participants. Due to the personal involvement of both the Forest and Mountain clans, they had been excluded from this role. Of the remaining ten clans, nine had been divided into three groups of watchful spectators. The remaining Water Clan, tasked with the protection of the Northern Capital, also served as the priests who carried out the competition rites since ancient times. They would always be in company, and only they were allowed to pass judgments regarding fairness. Oddly enough, they also had deep ties with Belluga, and Rafina had been comfortably chatting up their chief.

"So, there will always be eight riders there to act as our guards," concluded Mia.

And they weren't just *any* riders. Being a watchman of the Matching of Steeds was a role of utmost pride in the Equestrian Kingdom, meaning only the cream of the crop of horses and men from each clan would be chosen for the task. Thus, Mia had lost all hopes for duplicity...which also meant she had lost almost all hope for victory! After all, the possibility that Mia would win in a fair fight was infinitesimal, so of course she would lose unless she used some more *underhanded* means.

Well, I was never planning on winning in the first place anyway! It's no problem at all. I should just take my wins and be glad there's less of a danger of assassins with all these guards around.

You see, the ability to reach clear solutions when it comes to *anything* was incredibly important to Mia.

"In which case, if we provide our own protection, they will have to keep their distance," added Ludwig.

"Yes, that's correct. We'll have to camp at night, and it seems like supplying guards and supplies are permitted at those times. However, there'd be doubts of dishonesty if they became *too* close, so it'd be best that we keep on our toes and be cautious. A fully armored knight may be too heavy to catch up to us on horseback, regardless."

The last of Mia's words were meant as a half joke, but a member of the Princess Guard currently in attendance gave a completely serious nod. "Yes,

you may be right. We can't risk them finding fault with your victory."

Those words caused Mia a *slight* feeling of unease, however...

"Is this...not something we can avoid?" These sudden words completely wiped her worries away! They were spoken by Anne, who was currently looking at Mia with fear in her eyes.

"Hm? Oh, yes. You're right. It would be a bit difficult to refuse now, but..." The intensity of her stare had nearly overpowered Mia, but she managed a nod.

"Understood. In that case...I shall make all the preparations I can." With that, Anne left, her dark expression still adorning her face.

Hm? What is she talking about? Preparations?

While Mia was completely at a loss, Ludwig carried onward. "It would be disastrous should something happen to Her Highness. I doubt the provided protections will prove sufficient, so I'll need to discuss the position of guards with Lord Mayun... Lord Dion!"

Thus, Mia's crew jumped into action! But there was an important truth that had been lost on Mia—not a single soul was preparing for her favorable defeat. Their hearts, in fact, were not one.

After concluding her meeting with Ludwig and the others, Mia stepped outside and heaved a sigh.

"All these talks one after another have left me feeling a bit fatigued..." She gave her stomach a soft rub. Before she had realized it, it was almost lunchtime! "Well, I will be doing some exercising. It's a horse-riding competition after all! I do think I deserve to go a bit all out with this meal. I'll celebrate early and—"

"Princess Mia!" a voice called out, interrupting her.

"My, if it isn't Miss Aima. What is it? You seem to have gone quite pale."

"What is it? It is *I* who should ask that of *you*. Your actions were rash. When it comes to horses, it is I who should—"

Aima was in a panic, but Mia addressed her with a soft smile. "There is no reason to fret." She grasped Aima's forearms...and became enraptured! Her arms were so firm and slender!

"Hm? What troubles you, Princess Mia?" Her confusion was written all over Aima's face. She looked suspicious.

Mia shook her head flustered. “Yes, of course! There is no reason to fret! There is still some time left. Things will be all right... Perfectly fine...”

Mia was speaking more to herself than Aima, but anyway...she was right. This wasn’t the place for her to risk it all in a game of sink or swim. All she needed was to bring the Fire Clan ever closer to reconciliation with the other Equestris. Even the matter of their wolves would be solved in time—eventually, the others would understand. For now, simply securing support for providing provisions was enough. With that...

“We’ve already won this match! There is absolutely nothing you need to worry about.”

...Yup, they had already cleared their victory conditions. Now, all Mia needed was to survive the Matching of Steeds unscathed.

“So, you have devised a route to victory. That being said, I hear that the Matching can be trying. On certain courses, some riders have lost weight in just two days. I cannot allow you to participate in such an extreme trial...”

“My! I see. In which case, I really have no option but to participate.” Mia shook her head in determination before folding her arms in satisfaction.

This Matching of Steeds thing is utterly amazing! I can slim down in just two days, and it’ll be quite the exercise! I’ll be killing two birds with one stone!

Once again, Mia was satisfied with her choices. All the problems that were troubling her leading up to her confrontation with Abel’s sister had been resolved in an instant. Her future was as bright as the moon.

Plus, no matter how trying the Matching of Steeds would prove, Mia had survived the revolution. *Matching of Steeds, how feeble you are!* With that, Mia let the breath out of her nose in a huff.

Of course, common knowledge would’ve told Mia that there was no way a foreign princess would be allowed on a course that could thin someone to the bone in just two days. Instead, she’d be given a simpler course—one easy enough for a child. So much was obvious, but sometimes, even the obvious could escape Mia.

Still, Mia’s thoughts had convinced her that there was no way she would lose to the High Priestess, and they currently had her face erupted into a grin.

“Oho ho! My victory is assured!” she mumbled to herself when suddenly...

“I cannot ignore such words...I do say.” Turning behind her, Mia found Xiaolei staring at her with a dangerous look in her eyes.

“My, if it isn’t Xiaolei. I am looking forward to a fair fight with you,” replied Mia with a smile. However, Xiaolei ignored her, instead heading straight for Aima before giving a deep bow.

“Lady Aima. My father has treated you poorly, I do say, and I deeply apologize.”

Aima’s face remained stiff as she shook her head. “No. It was merely a difference in values. We sold our sheep. Thus, we gained gold. There was no injustice in such an act, so there is no need to apologize.”

A bit of thought would make that truth evident. The twelve clans had supported each other over all these years, and so extending a hand in their times of need had come to be recognized as the obvious course of action.

Yet the Fire Clan had never been a part of their circle of mutual charity. Instead, they aimed to reach equal footing with the others by relying solely on themselves. Thus, the trade they had made with the Mountain Clan had been fair and only fair. The Mountain Clan had an ulterior motive, and it was because of that that their clan fell on hard times. But still, failing to see through that was nothing but a blunder on their part.

Thus, Xiaolei’s apology was senseless. The Fire Clan made no assumption that they would receive selfless altruism from the other clans, and acknowledging such would simply hurt their sense of pride. Feeling the deep crevice that stood between the two, Mia felt assured that pushing too hard for reconciliation would only make the crack between them grow wider. Once again, Mia was completely satisfied with her choices! But suddenly, a voice cut into her thoughts.

“However, Princess Mia...”

Mia had missed when it started, but Xiaolei was glaring at her. “My, what is it, Xiaolei?”

“There is something I will have you understand. You have insulted me, I do say. Your declaration of victory before the battle has even begun is an affront to both myself and Loklou, and it is very hard to forgive such...I do say.”

“Huh? Oh... No, I wasn’t speaking about—”

“You will pay for this...I do declare.” Ignoring any explanation from Mia, Xiaolei turned away and left, not sparing even a single glance back in

her direction.

Chapter 2: The Empire's Horse Maniac Gives a Lecture!

Hm... Things might have just gotten a bit tricky...

Thoroughly pissing off Xiaolei had left Mia feeling just a *tad* anxious.

She was so shaken she might demand Dongfeng out of revenge! I really blew it this time. I should have kept my mouth shut...

But now, it was too late for regrets. Realizing she needed to prepare for everything, Mia visited Gorka, stableman of the Princess Guard. He was in the barn next to the current lodgings of the Forest Clan, and when she found him, Mia addressed him with a quivering voice.

"Gorka, do you have a moment?"

"Oh, Your Highness. What is it?" He greeted her with a smile, but a single glance at Mia left him looking a bit troubled.

Thoughts like *"Agh! This is so hard to say!"* and *"I can't do it!"* running through her head, Mia made her resolve and spoke. "Well, it turns out that I will be racing against an Equestri rider on horseback."

Mia carefully explained what went down at the Meeting of Chieftains, being extra carefully sure to point out that this was a situation she had absolutely no control over—it was a noble sacrifice of utmost importance!

"But due to my oversight, Dongfeng may be taken from us... I am deeply sorry for exposing him to danger after you took so much care in looking after him." In complete despair, Mia looked to her feet. Then, she took a quick glance up at him...only to find that her prediction had been correct. His face was pulled taut, and his brow furrowed.

Oh, he's so going to get mad at me... I guess so much is only natural.

Mia began to scheme. She was speaking to a trusted member of the Princess Guard. A rather important one at that—he single-handedly cared for all the guard's horses. Dampening his mood could prove troublesome in an emergency. Should she apologize again? Just as that thought flitted through her head...

“If that is the decision you made, Your Highness, I have no grounds for complaint.” Gorka cut her off with a sullen frown. So he couldn’t hide his ire, as was only natural. At least, that’s what Mia thought. “Besides, Dongfeng is a warhorse, and thus may lose his life at any moment. He would offer himself up for Your Highness’s sake at any moment. I can accept that fact, but there’s also something I cannot—that you would assume that he would lose to an Equestrian steed from the start.”

That’s when the conversation started to get *weird*.

Huh? What is he so angry about?

Mia was left confused as Gorka tightened his fist. “Yes, the Equestrian Kingdom’s moonhares are fine steeds. Even I know the extent of their wondrous speed, and they are surely attractive. It’s true—when one attempts to imagine the finest of horses, what springs to mind is a moonhare. But you know, our Dongfeng—or any of the Empire’s horses—will not lose.” With that, Gorka gave a soft spank to Dongfeng’s behind as the horse lazily munched away at the grass in front of them. “If you truly believe that Tearmoon’s terretortue horses cannot hold a flame to Equestrian steeds, then I can say it’s nothing but a rare lapse of insight on the part of Your Highness.”

Thus, Gorka—secret horse maniac of the Tearmoon Empire—regaled the story of horses’ status within his dear country.

From the get-go, Mia had forgotten a simple fact. Just what *was* Dongfeng? Why was he here in the first place? Of course, it was because he was a *war*horse! He wasn’t just some lazy bum, he was a full-fledged horse of battle raised just for Tearmoon’s cavalry! Just like the military doctrine of the Kingdom of Remno, Tearmoon had its own vague rules of combat—one that was so basic it was hardly worth discussing. It said thus: “Outnumber the enemy, gather provisions, and crush them.” This guiding principle was the logic used to walk the path of just rule, serving as the foundation of Tearmoon’s army.

It also happened to be that Tearmoon’s army made all its decisions based on this one teaching. And so, what did that teaching of outnumbering the enemy dictate when it came to horses? It was *not* that each horse be as good as two. No, Tearmoon did not seek to raise illustrious steeds. They simply sought to outnumber the enemy, and thus all they wanted was that each

horse be as good as one. No matter the environment, no matter the situation, the steed needed to do only the job expected of it. *That* was what Tearmoon was after, and it was the terretortue that had been chosen to meet these requirements.

Overwhelmingly tough, calmly and devotedly carrying out their work in any situation, and sound of mind and stubborn no matter the circumstance —that was the reputation that preceded the workhorses that were the pride of Tearmoon's army. Plus, Dongfeng was an absolutely and unmistakably standard-edition terretortue. The exact *average* of average terretortues! He was a stout destrier—perhaps a tad *too* stubborn but always unflinching as he silently carried out his duties.

This passionate and very detailed speech had left Mia feeling...a tad troubled.

That's right. He also...

Mia turned her mind back to the guard member who had been in attendance during her meeting with Ludwig. He had absolutely no doubts that Mia would lose. And what about Ludwig's suggestive "Yet..."? Just then, Mia reached a shocking conclusion: the idea that the horses they were so proud of—and *especially* the Great Sage of the Empire they were so proud of—could lose had never even crossed their minds!

But now wasn't the time for that. Mia glanced at the guards just outside the corner of her sight...only to find them locked in excited conversation. And from what she could hear, they were talking about horses!

Th-They're so...passionate...

It was then that Mia had realized her mistakes; it appeared that the whole of the Princess Guard were horse-racing fanatics. Something about it got their blood *boiling*. But there was a more important question: what would come of it should she face an ugly loss in front of these devout soldiers? It would destroy their morale, and maybe—just *maybe*—it might lend its way into her omnipresent danger should they encounter a battle with the wolfmaster.

Aaagh! I messed up! I really *messed up!*

While Mia's thoughts were spinning in her head, horse maniac Gorka was still continuing his impassioned lecture. As for Dongfeng? He was just lazily and dazedly watching over them.

Chapter 3: Anne's Small Act of Infidelity

The Matching of Steeds had been planned for five days in the future, and as soon as it had been decided upon, each clan had sent out their fastest steeds to position their best horses and men along the course. Mia, meanwhile, had also been busy with her own preparations. While the race would only last two days, it was still quite a long journey, meaning there was plenty of work that needed to be done.

While they would be accompanied by cavalrymen, she couldn't ask for their help—instead, as long as she was on horseback, she needed to do everything herself. As long as nothing drastic happened, she wouldn't receive any aid...but that was also exactly how Mia wanted it!

This is excellent practice should anything bad happen! Everyone's always stopped me from going on any long-distance rides, so this is perfect!

Mia wanted to gain as much practice as possible beforehand so that just in case a careless mistake on her part led to a revolution, she'd be able to escape on her own.

"The course goes from the Southern Capital to Stargrass Rock, but you will need to stop at this watering hole as well," explained Mayun of the Forest Clan, a map rolled out in front of him. As someone who had once been an accompanying rider during a previous Matching, he was quite knowledgeable in its workings. According to the map, Mia would first need to head west after starting at the Southern Capital. Once she reached the watering hole, she would now travel east toward the goal, located just north of her starting point. "There are many points to collect water along the way, so the course should not prove too tough."

"I see. In that case, I should make camp at one of those points."

"Yes. There may be some unmarked streams, but..."

"If we know where we can collect water, then there is no need to make camp elsewhere. Hm..." Mia bowed her head in thought.

Horses are living beings just like us, so they will need food and water as well. That means that if I ever run away, I'll need to consider in advance

where I'll be able to provide my horse with these necessities. I guess if I were in a field, it'd basically be a horse buffet, and while bringing food with me would weigh the horse down, it would also mean I could traverse some rougher terrain. That would probably also decrease my chances of being followed... Hm, and each escape route would provide its own problems...

Mia's escape plans were becoming more and more robust by the second! But it was very *uncertain* if the day she'd ever have to use them would actually come...

"I see that there are enough unknowns that I'll have to make many of these decisions on the fly, but I'm sure that will also prove a useful experience." Mia was trying to fire herself up, but there was still some anxiety she couldn't fully rid herself of.

I really need to think of some strategy to win, but... Hmmm...

Mia turned that thought over and over in her mind, but while she was still ruminating for a solution, she encountered some trouble while trying on her new riding gear!

"Anne, I think this may be a bit... Well, what do you think?" After staring down at her own clothing, Mia flashed Anne an inquisitive look.

"I believe it suits you nicely, milady," said Anne with a smile.

Mia had *never* doubted Anne's devotion, but she couldn't help but have some misgivings after hearing *that*, for Mia was now...a fluffball. And not because she had eaten too much! That would be a grave misunderstanding. It was just that the clothing she now adorned was so thick and *fluffy*. It was traditional clothing of the Equestrian Kingdom, covered abundantly on the outside with wool. It was an excellent item, as the oils on the outside repelled rain while being thick enough to thoroughly protect against the cold. But still...

"I do understand that it will grow quite chilly in the evenings, but won't this keep me a bit too warm? Not to mention that anything too thick would prove a burden on Dongfeng as well."

"No, I made sure to discuss it first with Mr. Gorka. This is nothing compared to the heavy armor a warhorse normally has to carry," Anne replied, a little too quickly.

That's right, Dongfeng was a destrier who routinely carried members of the Princess Guard, which were (theoretically) much heavier than Mia. Her clothing might have been thick, but Mia could still move in it, meaning it

would have absolutely no effect on Dongfeng.

"But still..."

Mia understood that fact, but if she was vying for victory, wouldn't the lightest of clothing prove the most favorable?

Mia's doubts had Anne looking quite nervous. "Plus, um..." Anne added. "I've heard that sweating while exercising leads to weight loss..."

"Moons! Is that true?" Mia...took the bait! Hook, line, and sinker.

Looking a bit guilty, Anne averted her eyes. "I at least...*believe*...I've heard such words before. Though it is just a rumor..."

"A rumor, hm?" Mia crossed her arms in thought. It was unclear how much faith could be put in this rumor, but...it still seemed worthy of consideration. "Hmph... Well, it *is* true that mushrooms which have lost their water content do seem slimmer..."

The Matching of Steeds was *also* rumored to slim down its riders. So what would happen should wearing warm clothing also add the effect of lost sweat? Mia reached one conclusion...she'd be able to prepare even *better* for her meeting with Abel's sister.

Yes, it would be best to win the Matching, but I also can't lose focus of my goal! Chasing both a rabbit and a mushroom will result in catching neither, resulting in an empty pot! At least, that's what they say.

Wouldn't it be best to focus her goal down to one? Doesn't she need to get her priorities straight? Mia was certain that *that* was what Anne was trying to tell her, meaning that the thick, fluffy clothing was all just a part of that.

"Anne..." Mia had the magnanimity to lend her ears to the admonitions of her loyal retainers, and thus she gave a warm smile to her trusted Anne—the one who had opened her eyes. "I understand, Anne. I will accept your kindness."

Mia had found what was most important to her, and it was all thanks to Anne. Her victory conditions were now clear. Thus, Mia spoke her next words with conviction.

"Now, I can win."

"Milady..." That word was spoken with a slight tremor.

You see, Anne was afraid. That fear had sparked in her on their way to the Equestrian Kingdom, right when they had made contact with the Fire

Clan. After hearing that Mia had fallen from her horse while riding with Rafina, Anne had worried that her dear master had perished...and her heart had trembled.

Thus, Anne was actually *against* the Matching of Steeds. She wanted to do absolutely everything she could to avoid exposing Mia to danger, but once Mia had determined something to be necessary, Anne could no longer be in dissent. In which case, what *could* she do? Her long ruminations to find an answer had led her to one conclusion: the thick and fluffy suit. It might have been resistant to both the cold and rain, but there was *another* use that it served—should Mia fall from her horse, it would break her fall and lessen her injuries. In fact, the clothes that now adorned Mia were worn by Equestri children while they first learned the basics of horsemanship for that very reason.

Anne had brought her concerns to Malong, and as a result, she had obtained this clothing. Of course, Anne was well aware that they would not help Mia in her quest for victory. It was obvious that a horse would travel fastest with the lightest of loads. Anne was being selfish, and while her motivations were her master's protection, it was still an act of infidelity toward Mia's goal of victory. Punishment for such actions was all but assured, and refusal to follow Anne's suggestion was all but a given.

And still...Mia had accepted with a smile.

"Now, I can win."

By declaring her victory, Mia had taken in Anne's selfishness, all the while ridding Anne of her fears.

"Milady..."

Anne bit her lip, but Mia simply looked back to her with a confident smile.

Chapter 4: Headeth Onward, O Heavy-Armored Mia

The day of the Matching of Steeds had arrived, and the Southern Capital was filled with those who had gathered from all over the Equestrian Kingdom. While their numbers of course did not reach every person in all the twelve clans, there were many who had come from those nearby, and they all waited with bated breath for the ceremony that was the Matching to begin.

The first to appear before the crowd was Xiaolei, rider for the Mountain Clan. The young maiden sat atop the best horse Fuma, her clan's chief, had to offer. It was Loklou, a horse so dear, he even called it...his "daughter." Loklou's most striking feature was her mane, as imposing as that of the legendary lion and shining with brilliance. Her headstrong gaze had the elegance of a queen, hinting at her strong health. Everything from her lean snout, taught neckline, and outline of her slender legs was exactly the ideal held by Equestris of what made a swift steed—her hind legs that trampled the earth below revealed a strength that even *exceeded* those expectations. She was the imposing horse queen Loklou—the "Fallen Dew"—named after the transient yet striking light that filled the sky the moment the morning dew falls to earth.

Even a full day of casting their gaze upon her could not quench the crowd's thirst, and they made their admiration known.

"So, that is Loklou of the Mountain Clan..."

"Her reputation as the finest of moonhares does indeed precede her..."

"Yes, it is clear why Chief Fuma takes so much pride in her. She is truly marvelous."

But their praise did not end at the horse; it was also directed toward her rider. Xiaolei sat up tall, walking before the crowd as if the horse was an extension of her own limbs. She adorned lightweight riding clothes that had been fastened from high-grade Remno silk, and they glistened in a way that

was unfamiliar to Equestri eyes.

“She maneuvers that horse excellently. Both the horse and rider are truly excellent.”

That praise was echoed in the hearts of all in attendance, but they suddenly froze in shock. Mia had finally arrived, and she stole their eyes in a *different* sense.

“Just what...?”

They were lost for words. Mia was wearing a fluffy coat made for novice children! Wrapped in this bulky attire, Mia sat straddled across her horse expressionless. She simply stared forward as if her soul had escaped to some far-off land, the only thing reflected in her eyes the plains beyond.

And it wasn’t just the heavy-armored Mia that looked a bit *off*, her horse did too! Yes, its fur did shimmer. While its moonlight-colored palomino coat paled in comparison to Loklou’s, it held a healthy glow. There were no doubts that this horse was well cared for. While its clear eyes were small, its toned body hinted at the depth of its care.

Still, no one could help but think that Mia was clearly outclassed. Especially with that outfit.

Xiaolei slowly approached her. “That’s quite the nostalgic uniform you have there...I do say. Was there a chance of rain or snow today, Princess Mia?” After taking a look at Mia’s attire, Xiaolei glanced her eyes toward the sky. Seeing not even a cloud in the sky, she shrugged. “Or maybe it’s just that you are too afraid to ride without it...I do ask?”

Xiaolei’s lips turned into a derisive grin. She was egging Mia on! Making a fool of her! But Mia...was silent. Silent! No anger or shame—not even a forced smile of confidence—showed on her face. Instead, her eyes simply stared at what lay in front of her. The voices of those around her could no longer reach Mia. She was currently putting all her heart into gathering her concentration. Her conversation with horse maniac Gorka, the worry and expectations of her dear vassals, and all sorts of other troubles had left her heart disquieted. But thanks to Anne, she had finally been able to return to her starting point. And where was that? Why of course...

I’ll have some fun riding my horse and get slimmed up! That’s*what I need to focus on!*

...it was that! This was the reason Mia had decided to participate in the Matching! Well actually...that’s doubtful.

Despite the definite room for doubt, the above was still the goal Mia had set out to accomplish.

"Have fun...riding horses..." muttered Mia, reminding herself of her objective.

I should have expected nothing less of Anne. She really is trustworthy.

Not only had she clarified Mia's goals, she had also shared some encouraging advice. Mia needed to sweat as much as possible! She'd have to be quite warm, but if this was all the hard work she needed...

"This will be easy..." she muttered.

And Mia also wanted to win. As long as it wouldn't be too much work. Dongfeng was a Tearmoon warhorse confidently backed by Gorka. Thus, there was a chance he could win, despite whatever thoughts Mia might have been having.

If I don't have faith in the steeds of Tearmoon's cavalry, just who will?

The Princess Guard were devout knights existing to protect Mia whenever she might be in need, which is exactly why Mia wanted to do everything she could to protect their honor. Similarly, she also wanted to believe in their horses.

"I am certain you can win this, Dongfeng," said Mia as she petted his neck. Then, she looked up to find...

"Tee hee! I pity your horse, I do say. Well, just do your best...I do say."

...Xiaolei, looking completely fired up.

"Greetings, Xiaolei. I look forward to our match. Let us both do our best." Mia beamed at her, but Xiaolei simply gave her a pained glare before walking away.

And of course, Dongfeng simply watched her go with his usual blank stare.

At the starting line, a man stood holding a large flag. It was deep red, and once he had raised it in the air, he gave it a single twirl...

"Proveth thy devotion with thou swiftness! Let the Matching of Steeds begin!"

The red flag returned to earth like a shooting star, and the Matching began.

Chapter 5: The Stupid Steed and the Sagacious Princess Become the Sagacious Steed and the Stupid Princess

Loklou bolted forward as soon as the start of the Matching had been announced, kicking the earth with a gallant whinny. With one step, she flung her body forward, and with the next, she flew with the wind. The display was that of an undoubtedly excellent steed—a starting dash that proceeded her reputation as the finest of moonhares. Xiaolei relished in the cries of delight let out from the crowd as she turned to her opponent to boast...only instead to be shocked!

"She's not here...I do say?"

It took some strain on her eyes to spot them, but Mia and Dongfeng were far behind, calmly trotting along not too far from the starting line. It was more like they were headed for a picnic than a marathon of epic proportions. Seeing that, Xiaolei couldn't help but curse under her breath.

"Damn! What a brilliant move... It is impossible to hold her in contempt for this...I do say," she groaned as she moved her eyes back in front of her.

In the meantime, Xiaolei's father Fuma was contorting his *own* face in anger as he watched Mia's slow start to the race.

"Damn her... To think she wouldn't fall for my bait! What an impertinent little..."

Mia's dignified start to the battle had meant the end for Fuma and Xiaolei's machinations. That's right! The battle had begun *before* the race! Xiaolei had intentionally tried to bait Mia with her taunts.

Experienced participants of the Matching of Steeds all knew it was key not to overexert yourself at the start. In a two-day race, any distance put between the two competitors at the onset was trivial. Going at it at full speed for the whole duration would be impossible, and there were times

where it would be advantageous to slow one's gallop as well. Thus, dashing full-force from the start was simple ostentation. Plus, the most trying section would come at the end, as it was an uphill climb to the goal of Stargrass Rock. The grasslands were a flat plane, but the summit of the single precipitous climb had been chosen as the Matching's endpoint. Thus, it was necessary to save your horse's energy until the very end—and inversely, it was best to begin the race slowly.

Still, Xiaolei had decided to jump the start. Mia was unaccustomed to riding, and so Xiaolei had schemed to have her bring about her own demise. By forcing Mia to chase after her, Xiaolei would also force Mia to spend all of her horse's energy during the preliminary stages of the battle while *also* dishing out a blow to Mia's morale by showing off the vast difference in pedigree between Loklou and Dongfeng.

"How preposterous to think she would not chase after..."

It is only natural to pursue your opponent once they pull ahead, as is becoming overwhelmed with an urge to get into a battle of speed right from the onset. Especially after so much taunting.

But Mia had ignored it all. No matter the distance put between her and Xiaolei, her velocity remained the same slow and steady pace.

"I see that she was not all bark. Her calm demeanor is astounding. Just as her nickname of the Great Sage of the Empire would suggest, she is surely a princess of sagacious intellect. Yet no matter how great the rider, there's no working with a stupid steed like that..." As is obvious, the Matching of Steeds comes down to one's horse's power. "Had she chosen a horse of Loklou's caliber...had she chosen that excellent steed of the Fire Clan...things might have been different for her. Hmph. We'll crush both her and her silly declaration that no horse can be better than another," spat Fuma with a scowl as he watched Mia disappear into the distance.

Now, we return ourselves to the sagacious Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon, who just had the best start to the race imaginable. While it's doubtful such clarification is necessary, this was of course *not* a result of Mia's extensive pondering. She was barely thinking at all. Instead, she simply was conforming to the horse, which meant it was Dongfeng, the stupid steed, who decided *this* was how the pair would begin the race.

You see, Dongfeng was a warhorse, and being one, he knew that it was

inadvisable to use too much energy while the path ahead lay uncertain. It was Dongfeng—and Dongfeng *alone*—who had settled on such a strategy.

Thus, what really lay before Fuma was a sagacious steed and a stupid princess, but lucky for Mia, there was no one there who had noticed.

Oho! I expected he'd start things off slow. This would be unimaginable with Kuolan, but I'm glad all I have to do is sit back and relax.

But as her horse bobbed her up and down, Mia reached another realization.

Wait, but then I wouldn't be exercising, would I? Perhaps it's best I up the rigor a bit.

Mia's thoughts immediately turned to action with a *pat pat* to Dongfeng's back.

"Let's up our speed a bit, Dongfeng."

Dongfeng twitched his ears. Then, he was silent until finally, he did as Mia commanded.

"Oh! So, you plan to pursue your opponent. You have quite the sharp instincts."

Mia turned to the sudden voice to find that a horse had pulled beside her, the burly chief she had met at the Meeting of Chieftains sitting upon its back.

"My, and you are...?"

"Ha ha! This is not our first meeting, but let me once again state my name. I am Muk Gongma, proud leader of the Wood Clan."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, and it is quite reassuring to have a chief as company," beamed Mia.

Gongma bowed his head in gratitude. "I am impressed to see you did not fall for Xiaolei's taunting. You must be quite familiar with the rules of the Matching. How very admirable!"

Gongma was laughing, but Mia just looked confused.

"I am simply surrendering myself to my horse."

Mia kept her mouth shut. No brags that "of course this was my strategy!" escaped her lips.

The biggest reason for that was her fellow interlocutor—he was a chief of the Equestrian Kingdom, and thus a horse expert. Any overconfidence would not go past him. At the same time, he seemed to be quite fond of Mia, which meant any holes in her act as an equestrian maestro could easily

lose her an ally. Thus, she needed to be both humble and honest.

I want to be like Dongfeng! were therefore the words running through her head.

Chapter 6: Princess Mia Is Perturbed

"Surrendering yourself to your horse, you say..." While those words had been spoken by a foreign princess, they ignited an odd sense of nostalgia within Gongma. Such a statement was enough to move any Equestri, as this was the exact advice given to wee children the first day they found themselves upon a pony. Gongma and the other attendants were no exception.

Despite being the most basic of basics, it was clear that Mia had absolute faith in them. "Yes, as I am certain Dongfeng must be more knowledgeable about galloping than I am. He must be more aware of the road to victory as well," Mia added, her face aglow with perspicacity.

"I see. Her Highness sowed the seeds that blossomed into this Matching during our Meeting of Chieftains, and thus her words are weighty ones. I see that Her Highness has faith in horses as strong as any Equestri."

Gongma felt that Mia's pureness of heart could also be gleaned from her novice attire. Surely they had been a gift received during her early days of riding, and she now adorned them during this pressing time so she could remember exactly how she felt back then...or at least, that's what he was about to convince himself of before he suddenly got the feeling that something was *off*. If Mia intended to give herself entirely to her trusted steed, why had she just demanded he accelerate? That could be nothing but the will of Mia herself, and it was a decision adopted with incredibly apt timing. Should they speed up now, they would shortly get Xiaolei back in their sights. Loklou was a fine horse, but even she could not keep up such a hasty pace.

Yes, that truth should have been obvious. Her relinquishment of the lead to the rider for the Mountain Clan was surely the will of her steed, yet she must also have her motive as well. But just what could that—? Gongma let out a groan. Mia most likely had checked the course beforehand with the map. No, correction—she had *definitely* checked beforehand. Still, theory is different from practice, and Mia had yet to run the course herself. Thus, it

would be perfectly practical to give the lead to her opponent so she could survey the situation. *No, the princess is of great wisdom. That being her plan is all but certain. Despite relinquishing the lead, she still seeks to keep her opponent in her sights. Only that way will she be able to learn of the course ahead.*

Gongma had reached a conclusion—not only had Mia gallantly ignored Xiaolei's taunts, she also had her own scheme at work.

Princess Mia took the Meeting of Chieftains by the reins. Such insight would be nothing new for her.

However, there was still a question Gongma couldn't shake, and he wasn't one who could leave it unasked. "Coincidentally, Princess, is there a special meaning behind your attire?"

That's right—Gongma simply could not let Mia's novice fluffball suit go. He needed to know if it was *really* a simple reminder of a beginner's pure heart.

"Oh, this? Tee hee! My dear retainer went through the trouble of preparing it for me and requested that I wear it," Mia said with a grin. "She absolutely insisted that this be the clothing I wear during the Matching. Since Dongfeng is a warhorse and all, this clothing should not prove too heavy for him."

"Oh? Hm..."

Gongma contorted his face in thought—were these really words to take at face value? Based on his previous deductions, it should indeed be true that Mia's uniform had been prepared by her retainer, but it was also certain that the clothes served a scheme of Mia's own. But just what *was* that? The Mia in front of him exuded no animus as she looked to him with a tilted gaze. It was the epitome of thoughtlessness, but just what machinations were hiding behind that veneer?

Mia's mind was a bottomless pit, and Gongma had found himself falling to its nonexistent depths.

While Mia had been trying to kill time with chitchat, she had not forgotten her true mission. Now that she had upped their speed, she needed to match her movements with Dongfeng's! So she currently was doing calisthenics with her knees to match the rhythm of his steps. Unlike Kuolan, Dongfeng's gait was relaxed. Finding his rhythm was a piece of cake for a

dancing prodigy like Mia, and she simply let herself fall into the charming staccato of his hooves. She deftly maintained her balance in order to not hinder his pace, and while such was only natural consideration for her dance partner, the accompanying horsemen from the Equestrian Kingdom could not hide their surprise at seeing a foreign princess so deftly capable of handling a horse.

Mia's bout of exercise had warmed her quite thoroughly. A cool breeze blew through the plains, and it felt lovely against her skin. This summer had proved not too hot, and the winds felt even cold as a result. But the calm breeze carried with it the rich smell of green, leaving anyone it blew passed refreshed.

"Oho! Horses are truly the best," Mia couldn't help but regret not making the effort to ride more after experiencing such pleasant exercise. "Let us be off, Dongfeng!" she cried, but then...something caught her eyes —shadows beyond the viridescent carpet she now traversed. Focusing her gaze, she realized it to be Xiaolei and her accompanying riders.

"Oho ho! I see I have caught up to you, Xiaolei. You will not be getting away this time!"

Thus, Mia awakened! She now understood the marvelous feeling of catching up to an opponent who had left you behind.

"I'm sure she'll be stressed should we pass her, but it might be fun to try to urge her forward from behind!" she muttered as she chased after Xiaolei and her retinue.

Chapter 7: Xiaolei Ingeniously Sees through Mia's Plan

Having discovered Xiaolei and her crew, Mia knew it to be her moment. Thus, she sped up, closing the distance between them. Rather, *he* sped up—it was Dongfeng who had made this judgment and taken action, not Mia. The warhorse himself had deduced it would be most advantageous to catch up to his opponents.

Mia, meanwhile, was lost in her simpleminded glee of having closed in on Xiaolei. "I see that I have finally caught up to you, Xiaolei."

"And I see that you are quite enjoying yourself, Princess...I do say. I do remember you saying something before the race began about how you would be having a joyful horseback ride..."

"My, I seem to be enjoying myself?"

Enjoying herself? Yes! Enjoying herself! Knowing it to be her moment, her thinking sped up, closing the distance between herself and Xiaolei. And yes, this time, it *was* Mia. Hoping to give herself an upper hand, Mia sought to make adroit use of Xiaolei's words.

"Why, of course I am. All I want is for this Matching of Steeds to be as fun as it can be."

"We're not foes!" was a point Mia played up with all she had. She simply wanted the most friendly and congenial race that could be had. At least, that's what she wanted to convince Xiaolei of. Thus, there would be neither friends nor foes, winners nor losers when the Matching had concluded, and they would simply celebrate that they had all reached the end in good health. *That* was all Mia wanted! It definitely had nothing to do with the fact that with mutual understanding established between them, she could face her defeat with peace of mind.

"Why don't we enjoy ourselves together for the majority of the Matching? Then, at the very end, we can race with all we have. Wouldn't that be wonderful?" Mia proposed.

There was no need to work so hard for two whole days, was there? It was enough to just give it your all right at the end, wasn't it? Can't we just have a fun and friendly long ride together until then? Mia wore the amicable smile of the angel, but she worked that point on Xiaolei with everything she had!

Coincidentally, Mia was not currently thinking about rushing her horse forward for the intense exercise it'd provide her with. You see, Mia had already completed her ultimate goal of getting a good workout in! At least, that's how she was approaching things. As a result, she had even started to have thoughts like, *Why don't we have a feast together tonight as a way to deepen our bonds of friendship?!*

It's true that sharing a meal is a step toward understanding.

Breaking bread together deepened bonds. Those were words Mia lived by.

"So, what do you think, Xiaolei?" asked Mia with a tempting grin.

"You want us to save the fight just for the very end...?"

Xiaolei mulled over Mia's words. That proposal completely negated any use for strategy during any of the route's turning points. As it was doubtful she was all that accustomed to horseback, it made sense coming from Mia. The chosen course for the Matching of Steeds was the easiest of them, but there were still some perilous points along the way. The final hill was the most obvious of these, but there were some other places where the two would have to duke it out as well. They were tests of one's horsemanship, and from Xiaolei's eyes, Mia must have deduced that it would be to her disadvantage to have that play into the Matching as well. Thus, Mia had suggested that the two peacefully ride together through those points.

However, it was an idea worthy of Xiaolei's consideration. Loklou was incredibly quick. In a race that relied solely on speed—especially if it was just a sprint to a nearby goal—she wouldn't lose. That was a given, and from what she could judge, Mia's horse was one built for stamina. If Mia was going to win, she would need to start the race before the two reached their final destination. So just what was to be made of the fact that she had proposed an all-out sprint right at the end?

Is she...actually assured of her horse's speed?! No, could that be why she let me take the lead at the start...I do ask?

Could Mia have taken things leisurely at the start to hide her steed's celerity, just so she could tempt Xiaolei into agreeing on a sprint and not a marathon?

She has quite the confidence, I do say. Does she truly believe she can best Loklou?

Xiaolei turned to Mia...whose head was tilted curiously. Xiaolei couldn't glean a single sliver of nervousness from her.

She's looking down on me! Making a complete fool of me, I do say!

Her stomach bubbled up in anger, but the calm part of her mind told her something as well—her opponent was the Great Sage of the Empire, and Xiaolei could afford no negligence in dealing with her. She had heard that it had been the Great Sage who sniffed out that infamous failed attempt at a coup in Remno. Thus, Mia wouldn't suggest a final sprint to the finish line without something to back that decision up. She must be certain of her victory, but that must *also* mean Mia did not want the race to drag into a marathon.

Wait, look at how she has positioned herself... Xiaolei made a sudden discovery. *Does she have me in front so she can judge the road ahead of her?*

A shiver made its way down Xiaolei's spine. Renouncing the marathon to instead only have their fight at the very end would mean Xiaolei would lose her advantage. As a native of these plains, she knew them better than Mia, but that would be meaningless in a simple sprint up a hill! Astonished that she had almost gotten herself entangled in such a plot, Xiaolei looked around her and found...one of the critical obstacles along the journey!

"If you wish to come with me, then you are free to do just that...I do say! That is, if you *can*!"

As soon as she spoke those words, Xiaolei tugged on Loklou's reins, leading her in a new direction.

Chapter 8: Mia Enjoys a Splash Fight of Shrieks and Giggles

Dongfeng immediately reacted to Loklou's sudden change of direction. He accelerated, chasing after Loklou's tail. Mia's reaction, meanwhile, was a pitiful shriek.

Incidentally, while Mia's soul was in full panic mode at this sudden change, her body mindlessly maintained its balance. Thus, she appeared to be simply acting the part of a maiden in distress to any onlookers. Well, anyway...

Loklou was headed for a slight decline, and she descended through it as if she was the wind blowing across its surface. Mia watched as the distance between her and her opponent rapidly increased, Loklou racing to become a speck in the distance.

"Augh! So, this is how you want to take things. Wishing for a relaxing and friendly ride with you really was too much to ask for!" Mia mumbled. Still, she had somehow managed to stay hot on Loklou's tail.

That was when she saw the riverbed. While incredibly shallow, the stretch between one shore to the other was wide. Loklou dashed through its meager current, sending water spraying up behind her with each step. Following right behind, Dongfeng flung his own hooves into the streamflow.

"That Loklou really is speedy! She really is a moonhare aft— Bwah!"

Splash! Loklou had kicked water straight into Mia's face. Xiaolei looked behind her with a triumphant grin...but that turned out to be too hasty of a response, as Mia wasn't perturbed at all! She, after all, had already mastered the art of swimming on that deserted island. Donning the nickname of the Waning Aurelia, Mia was a princess of both the land and sea. She was beyond a puddle's worth of water. Rather...

"Oho! I was beginning to get overheated. This is just what I needed!"

...she seemed to enjoy it! She gently flipped her hair back with a smile.

That's right, the fluffball suit had raised Mia's body temperature, making this splash fight incredibly pleasurable. But that wasn't the end of it—now cooled, Mia's brain had become clear, and she had a flash of inspiration!

Oho! I have an idea!

She would turn their riverside duel into a splash fight! Thus, their fierce race would turn itself into a fun game. Mia was still holding on to the last dregs of her original plan of turning the majority of the marathon into a simple fun outing. But this wouldn't be a fun play fight until Mia got payback.

"Dongfeng! Now's our chance. Get ahead of Xiaolei and return the favor!"

A one-sided beating did not make for a fun splash fight. They are only fun if you give tit for tat.

Dongfeng accelerated with Mia's orders. After suddenly passing in front of Loklou, he used his hindleg to give a strong kick of water behind him.

"Eek!"

But Xiaolei's adorable screech was only met with Mia's humorous grin. "Oho ho! That's for earlier, Xiaolei!" she responded in song as a thought suddenly occurred to her.

All this kicking water back at your opponent reminds me of Kuolan. I wonder if he and Loklou are related. Or maybe being mean is just in moonhares' blood...

While Mia was still lost in thought, Dongfeng made a slight adjustment to their course. Coming to, Mia discovered Loklou now once again in front and ready to send another splash of water straight to her face.

"My? Could you be trying to keep me from getting wet, Dongfeng?"

Mia's question was met with only a small twitch of his ears.

"Oho! I would expect nothing less of a Princess Guard steed. You know just how to deal with these meddlesome opponents."

Hearing Mia's booming laugh, Dongfeng let out a proud whinny.

"Augh! They really got me this time...I do say!"

Xiaolei gritted her teeth in frustration, water still dripping from her bangs. She had been certain that giving her opponent a good dousing would rob her of her calm. But what was the result? Mia wasn't perturbed at all! Rather, she had returned the favor, looking like she was quite enjoying

herself as she yelled “that’s for earlier!” with a proud chuckle.

Xiaolei had never even considered the possibility of retribution. It left her agitated. She even let out an unsightly shriek.

I see it was I *who was underestimating my opponent...I do say...*

Xiaolei had finally realized an obvious truth—Imperial Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon was not your average princess! Through her clan’s relations with Remno, she had come to know many foreign young noblewomen, many of which would be disgusted by and afraid of having water splashed on their faces. Thus, Xiaolei was certain that a sudden splashing would leave Mia agitated, angry, or at the very least unsound of mind. However...

Seriously! My expectations were completely bested. How could she stay calm?! She even tried to get payback!

Xiaolei’s calculations had completely missed the mark, but there was something that surprised her even more—Mia and Dongfeng had easily passed her. The difference in strength between Dongfeng and Loklou should be the same as night and day. Still, Dongfeng had easily passed by her. *That* was what really got to Xiaolei. Despite being in command of the stronger steed, Xiaolei had fallen behind. That could only mean one thing—Mia’s horsemanship exceeded Xiaolei’s own. She had chosen the rough terrain herself, and it had been *her* that challenged Mia to this battle. But now, it was *her* that was behind, in a truly and incredibly humiliating fashion.

“Augh! Not yet! The battle has just begun...I do declare! Next time, *I* will be showing you a thing or two!” she bemoaned.

Later, Xiaolei would realize that at that time, she had already fallen right into the trap of the Great Sage of the Empire. She had completely lost her composure, and her ice-cold frustration had completely enveloped her before she could notice, slowly gnawing away at her...

Chapter 9: Mia's Rye (BLEEP) Bread

The setting sun had dyed the sky red, and the footsteps of night's approach could be heard as Mia finally reached where she would make camp. The watering hole was located roughly halfway through the course, and tomorrow, Xiaolei and Mia would traverse its shores to turn themselves toward their goal located north of the Southern Capital.

"Oho! I'm right on schedule."

She had safely rendezvoused with her retinue of Princess Guard soldiers, but it was forbidden to receive their advice mid Matching. Thus, she had to limit contact with them as much as possible, and could only sit in silence as she waited for them to set up her tent and cook her meal. Usually, she would spend this time having a lively chat with Anne, but that had to be limited today too. "Hang in there, milady! I'll serve you my special something!" were the only words shared between them.

Incidentally, this "special something" of Anne's was a stew filled with the spices she had received from Nina, maid of Duke Greenmoon. The head chef of Whitemoon Palace gave Anne private lessons whenever she was in the capital, meaning she was no longer the Anne she used to be—she could now take on the momentous task of cutting vegetables and cooking them in the pot without incident! She had *evolved*!

While it was all well and good that she would be receiving a tasty meal, the silence left Mia feeling rather forlorn. But for the moment, things weren't all bad—she could see Xiaolei setting up camp of her own.

This is my chance! Xiaolei is by herself right now. Should we share a meal together, we'll be able to celebrate our good luck and deepen the bond between us in a natural way.

Had the two been surrounded by close comrades, it goes without saying that Mia would have no hopes of sharing a fun chat with Xiaolei. But for better or for worse, they both found themselves in solitude and banned from conversation with the rest of their retinues.

It would still be best to lose with the two of us on good terms. So why

don't we sit around the same bowl and deepen the bonds between us!

Satisfied with her deep intellect, Mia gave a nod before heading toward Xiaolei as quickly as her feet could carry her.

Meanwhile Xiaolei had met crushing misfortune—she had planned to make camp at the *next* watering hole, not this one. All because she had fallen right into Mia's trap and challenged her to a pointless duel. Had she just ignored Mia and continued her path unperturbed, she would have been farther ahead—maybe so much so that she would have all but ensured her victory.

"My apologies, Loklou. If only I had kept a level head..." Her shoulders slouched in disappointment as she gently stroked Loklou's neck. "Tomorrow, I'll put enough distance between us to secure our victory...I do say."

But Xiaolei's attempts at self-assurance were suddenly interrupted! It was Loklou, her trusted steed—or not. Rather...

"Xiaolei, do you have a moment?" It was her opponent, Mia! And she looked so happy-go-lucky it was vexing!

"Do you need something...I do ask?" she pouted as she looked behind her.

"Hm... I've been thinking about this for a while, but is your habit of adding 'I do say' or 'I do ask' to your sentences because you've mistaken it as a way to sound like a noblewoman?"

"Wha—?!" Xiaolei's pout turned into a grimace. Mia was right—Xiaolei had learned her speech habits from a young noblewoman she was acquainted with. She had called Xiaolei's way of speech plebeian, and suggested she add "I do say" to the end of all her sentences while in a fit of laughter. Of course, Xiaolei knew there was a chance the girl was making fun of her, but still, she decided to take her words at face value and watch her style of speech. And yet, the dastardly Mia had...

Seeing Xiaolei's silence, Mia groaned. "If you wish to become acquainted with me, I wouldn't mind teaching you proper speech but...wouldn't it be best if you just spoke normally?"

"Huh?"

"Well, take food for instance! Each land has its own cuisine and methods of preparing it. Tearmoon has many great types of mushrooms, but

I would never wish that those of the Equestrian Kingdom were all the same as Tearmooon's. I would never think of preparing Equestrian mushrooms with Tearmoon cooking methods either. That would be boring." Was she trying to make her explanation easier to understand by using metaphors? "Words are probably the same. You are free to wish to speak like a noblewoman, but I enjoy the Equestrian dialect as well. I believe your historic hymns sound even better that way."

Xiaolei hadn't expected to hear such words from her, and for a moment, she couldn't keep the shock off her face. She turned away. "E-Enough about that. What is it you need...I do ask?"

"Oh yes, that's right. I was thinking we could eat together."

"Hmph! Eating with a foe is out of the question!"

"Oh? What a shame. I was planning on introducing you to my special something," she said with a mischievous smile.

"Your 'special something'...?"

Confusion filled Xiaolei's eyes. But then, Mia suddenly pulled out *something*! Which was, put bluntly...rye bread. It was meant as rations for long journeys, and because it was so tough, it was usually eaten by dipping it in soup. Which was all fine, but the real issue was...its shape.

"Wh-What is that...?"

"Oho ho! It's my own invention, horse-shaped rye bread! Rye horse bread!"

"...Oh!"

Xiaolei was hooked! She gave a good look at the bread before her, and the moment she registered its shape, the joyous "oh!" escaped her lips.

"Why...this *is* horse-shaped...but..."

What... What... What genius! was running through Xiaolei's mind.

Xiaolei was astounded by the frighteningly good taste of the Great Sage of the Empire. To think she had never had the wonderful idea of making horse-shaped bread herself!

"Th-This is quite the creation...I do say. Yet you are naive, Princess." The light glowed bright in Xiaolei's eyes as she looked back at Mia.

"My, what do you mean?"

While Mia gave her an inquisitive look, Xiaolei shoved the horse-shaped bread forward.

"It is true. Making bread horse-shaped is an excellent idea, I do say. It is

genius, fitting of the excellence and unconventionality of the Great Sage of the Empire. Yet I also do say horses' ears are more like..." She twitched her fingers as she held them in the correct shape.

"Oho!" and Mia nodded, completely enraptured in the conversation.

Thus, the two fought a fierce battle as they debated the shape of a horse. Somehow, they had deepened their bond, if only by a bit.

Chapter 10: Princess Mia Fails at Cajolery... Wait, She Fails?

Mia had marvelously baited Xiaolei with her horse-shaped bread, and to keep her prey where she needed it, Mia invited her to a meal. She wasted no time in grabbing Xiaolei's hand and dragging her to the Tearmoon Stew Anne had prepared. Taking one look at the horse-shaped bread floating in its soupy contents, Xiaolei couldn't help but let out a cute gasp. But then she scowled.

"H-Hmph. This seems to be a decent meal...I do say. But don't you think the soup is a bit lacking in contents?" She then returned to the tent, only to bring something back to Mia.

"My, and what is that?"

"It's cheese. It melts inside the pot. It really is the best, I do say!"

"Oho..."

"I have some jerky as well. If you dice them up and add them to the pot, I do say they blend wonderfully with the cheese to create a rich umami taste."

"Oho!"

With the finesse of an expert, Xiaolei shaved off some cheese and tossed it into the pot. She then added the dried meat, dying the Tearmoon Stew a brilliant hue. Next to reach their nostrils was the mild yet mouthwatering aroma of melted cheese. Wearing this as a coat, the tasty morsels of meat bobbed up and down on the pot's surface, playing peek-a-boo with the two girls before them.

"Oho! By the moons, this is marvelous! The Equestris truly do have the best foods. Well then, I think it's time I take a bite..."

Removing one of the pieces of meat from the simmering contents, Mia dropped it on her own plate before chomping down.

"Hmf!"

Hot steam overflowed from her mouth. The melted cheese was like

molten lava, and Mia let out a *phoo phoo* as she tried to avoid burning her tongue. But that was probably the right thing to do, as it spread the rich flavor of cheese across her tongue. The mild taste of the cheese, its refreshing acidity, and the strong salty aroma of the jerky came together to play a ballad across her taste buds. Taking a bite of the hard meat sent the soup it had soaked up bursting through her mouth.

"Th-This is magnificent...!"

The two girls had lost the need for words. Locked in a trance, they simply ate away at the meal. Perhaps Mia had just been hungry, but the food was incredibly—*incredibly*—delicious, and before she knew it, the pot was empty. Mia felt as if she had time traveled. How truly frightening.

"Ah... I was completely lost in that meal. Oho! My stomach is perfectly full now. That was quite fun, Xiaolei," Mia said with a beam.

Xiaolei quickly turned her head away. "I-I do not intend on making friends with you, I do say! You're my enemy! I do say it!"

She turned to glare back at Mia, but Mia only smiled. But that was just a facade! Mia had been preparing a counter argument.

"I do believe you are mistaken about that."

"Mistaken? How...I do ask? Do you mean to say the Matching of Steeds is just an excuse to have a fun ride with your opponent? That is an insult to the ceremony, I do say!"

"No, that's not what I mean at all." With a slow shake of her head, Mia knew it was the time to lay out her theory! "Yes, the Matching exists to pit one opinion against another. Thus, I understand being seriously against your opponent. However..."

First, Mia assured her opponent that she understood their position.

"...The true battle lies only within the race."

Next, she put a clear deadline on their fight. Once the Matching was over, so, too, would their battle be. She was drawing a clear line in the sand—no animosity would exist between them after that moment. "Let's all just get along" was Mia's selling point.

"But it should be fought with proper respect to your opponent."

Then, Mia added a plea to not get too violent in their methods during the Matching and to instead play things out fair and square. Thus, she properly addressed the need to make sure no unnecessary feelings of ill will would remain once the race was over. Mia's deep benevolence shined!

“Differing opinions shall only be battled over during the Matching of Steeds. After, let us abide by that which hath won...”

“Huh?” Mia blinked her eyes at Xiaolei’s sudden words.

“That is a teaching from our founder Kuolong, I do say. Is this what you mean to suggest, Princess?”

“Yes! That’s exactly it!” Mia nodded her head vigorously as if to say “Mia thinketh the same!” Of course, Mia was not thinking so deeply about things, but so much was obvious. Still, Mia was not one to let go of a wave that had started forming, and she thus spoke her next words without hesitation.

“The Matching of Steeds is not a war to slay your opponent. It is simply a way of settling disputes to work toward cooperation. That means we are not enemies. Once this is over, should we not put our hatreds and personal feelings beside us to instead celebrate the victory together?” Mia stressed her point with a clenched fist.

“Princess...”

For just a moment, Xiaolei appeared to be truly and deeply moved...but then she once again averted her eyes.

“Those words are but an ideal. I cannot believe them, I do say.”

“I see. Well, that is quite the shame.” Mia let out a small sigh.

She is quite the formidable foe. Hm...

Mia looked to change her strategy, which was one of her signature moves.

“Still, I praise the race Loklou and you have run.”

With that, she lifted her opponent into the air with all she had! This move was an accomplishment that had saved her from danger time and time again. (At least, Mia had convinced herself of such.) Hoping this would be her way out this time as well, she set her mouth in motion. And thanks to the delicious meal that Xiaolei had provided her, Mia’s tongue was completely ready for all sorts of acrobatics.

“Watching Loklou today, I am certain she is worthy of the epithet ‘the Moonhare of Moonhares.’ You two were splendid! As a Tearmoon princess, I had thought myself well acquainted with fine steeds, but Loklou is a horse that can easily hold a candle to any one of them. And you as well. Even if there is no one else who could see your fine performance, I certainly did.”

“I’m the only one who can see your true worth!” was the point Mia was

trying to play up. After hearing such words, it would be incredibly difficult for Xiaolei to turn around and demand that Mia turn her horse over, and Mia sought to amplify such an atmosphere with everything she had. How cunning!

"Y-Your flattery is clearly empty. I do not wish to hear it, I do say." Xiaolei took to her feet. "I-I will not make friends with you any longer. I really will not, I do say! You best prepare yourself for tomorrow!"

With that, she marched into the distance. Watching her back, Mia sighed.

"Hah... It seems that I've failed..." She stood up and cast her gaze to the sky. "I wonder what tomorrow will bring."

Clouds slightly shrouded the light of the moon above as if to mirror Mia's apprehension.

Chapter 11: Like the End of a Wonderful Dream...

On the first night of the Matching of Steeds, there was a quiet *happening* in the Southern Capital.

"Mhm..."

It was the middle of the night when Citrina woke up to noises in the hallway—the *clomp clomp* of someone trying to hide their footsteps. For a moment, Citrina thought them to belong to a Serpent assassin, but then they passed by her room. They were headed outside. Citrina mentally recalled the room assignments and the position of guards around their lodgings. She had made sure to check them over in advance.

It is unlikely that Rina would be able to hear the footsteps of an assassin who could escape the guards.

She then turned her attention to Bel, who was sleeping in the neighboring bed. Her blanket had fallen to the floor, leaving her in a somewhat unsightly state. With a bitter smile, Citrina quietly picked up the blanket and pulled it back over her shoulders. Then, she softly cracked open the door to peek in the hallway. That's when she saw the silhouette of a young woman headed for the exit.

"Isn't that...?"

Her long black hair swayed with each step, and her back was perfectly aligned in an imposing stature. It was none other than Ka Aima.

Where is Miss Aima going at this hour?

Glancing around her, Aima continued to head toward the exit. It put Citrina at unease, so she pulled a cloak over her nightwear and silently slipped out of her bedroom.

Perhaps she was using her intuition of the wild, for the path Aima walked was not armed with guards. Mia, the brass of the group, had left on the Matching, leaving their forces divided. Plus, the guards had been positioned to stop people from coming in, not going out. Thus, Aima was

able to escape quite easily.

I am sure Mr. Ludwig had his hands too full with preparations for Her Highness to worry about the guards here...and while Dion Alaia would surely notice and stop her, he is away with Her Highness.

With such thoughts in her mind, Citrina quietly followed after Aima, who once reaching the outdoors without a hitch headed straight for the stables.

"Does Miss Aima intend to leave by herself? ...Hm?" Suddenly, multiple shadows joined her.

"My, is that Aima? What are you doing at this hour?" Her hair swaying in the moonlight, the voice belonged to Rafina Orca Belluga.

"Holy Lady Rafina... What is it that brings you here?"

Rafina met Aima's confusion with a gentle smile. "I was praying for Mia's victory."

Suddenly, Citrina noticed the third figure. It was Lin Malong. He had probably accompanied her as a bodyguard.

"Miss Rafina, being alone with Malong so late at night is bound to create some unfavorable rumors but...well, there are Belluga attendants accompanying her as well. I assume all is fine?" Holding slight doubts, Citrina resolved to simply keep watch.

"Well, I am sorry for turning the question back on you, but what are *you* up to, Aima?"

"W-Well, I... Right! I was about to head for a ride..."

"At this hour? Alone?" Rafina looked up at her, the suspicion clear on her face.

"Well, a nice horse ride alone at night is a wonderful thing, y'know. That's something you got to know yourself recently..."

"Malong..."

A shudder ran down Citrina's spine, giving her goose bumps. Rafina's lips were still shaped into a cool smile as she turned back toward Malong, but somehow, Citrina found this incredibly intimidating. So did Malong.

"Oh, that's right. That was supposed to be a secret. Ha ha ha!"

Or *not*!

Should you really be telling everyone that was a secret...?

Citrina could not help but give a silent comeback.

"Malong!" yelled Rafina. Her imposing aura had begun to dissipate,

bashfulness taking its place. They were said like any young teenage girl.

It was clear that something was going on between them, but anyway...

Rafina cleared her throat. “Aima, you’re not trying to leave by yourself, are you?”

Aima met that quiet question with a clenched fist. “I know that Princess Mia is risking herself for the sake of my people. How could I sit back and do nothing?” She slowly lifted her face to look at Rafina. “Ever since the Meeting of Chieftains...no, since long before that...I cannot help but think that if it were not for my brother and I, the Fire Clan would have been readily accepted into the Equestrian Kingdom. It is our command of wolves that is the issue. Yet, that is not a skill known to just anyone. Only our chief —my brother—and myself know. Thus...”

“If you took your wolves and left the Fire Clan, everything would be solved. Is that what you’re trying to say, Aima?”

Rafina spoke those words with little emotion. Whether Aima noticed or not, she continued onward.

“Those of the Fire Clan are kind. They do not try to banish me—instead, they protect me. But it is unjust to take advantage of that. Leaving is the most definite method to resolve the situation.”

“Hey, but...”

Malong tried to butt in, but he was interrupted by Rafina, who held up a hand to stop him. She gave a slight shake of her head. “I see. What a shame, Aima. I had thought you were a good friend of Mia’s.” She sighed, then turned her eyes up in a glare. “If you were truly her friend, you would not doubt her victory, would you? At least, as Mia’s *true* friend, I believe she will win.”

Inside Rafina’s heart, Mia had grown into something quite...grand. However, no one chose to point out that fact.

“This is not a problem of win or lose. I have put the fate of our clan on her shoulders. She did not need such pressure, and I...”

“So you don’t want to trouble your friend?” Rafina cut her off. Aima bit her lip in frustration, but Rafina continued with her scolding. “All that will do is make *you* feel better. You would only be running away. It would be a discourtesy not only to Mia, but also to the Fire Clan who have tried so hard to protect you.”

“Yet...”

“Don’t worry. I am certain Mia will win. If you call Mia a friend, you should believe that too. And, if you think you have caused her trouble, you just need to help *her* next time. Isn’t helping each other in their time of need the defining feature of friendship?” Her voice was clear of any doubts.

“Thank goodness. It seems that Miss Rafina has taken care of the situation...” Citrina let out a sigh of relief. She was certain that if Rafina hadn’t shown up, she would have failed to talk Aima out of her plan.

Truthfully, Citrina thought that Aima had reached the right conclusion. With Aima and her wolves out of the picture, the Fire Clan would be welcomed back into the Equestrian Kingdom no questions asked. Mia would lose the need to push herself so hard too. Thus, to Citrina, urging Aima forward was what needed to be done. It was logical...but...

“I see. So Rina could have stopped her too...”

And that possibility was all thanks to Mia. Given what *she* was trying to do, stopping her was the right decision. It was okay for Citrina to make the kindest decision too. She didn’t have to make only the one that was most logical. For her, it was bliss to find herself in such a warm and kind world. But maybe that was the reason...

...she was fatally too late in noticing the footsteps approaching her.

Arms suddenly wrapped around her, holding her still.

“Mnnnh?!”

At the same time, a cloth was pushed up to her nose and mouth. As soon as that sweet yet dangerous aroma hit her nostrils, she knew exactly what it was.

Oh... This is bad...

She flailed her limbs in panic, but they quickly became numb. Then, immobilized.

“Mnh... Ngh...”

Struggling in vain, her knees buckled beneath her. She felt intoxicated, her consciousness wavering in and out of clarity.

Bel...

But those words could no longer be vocalized.

“Wasn’t expecting to find that traitor here. Damn, I’m really not too

good with kids...”

That voice sneaked its way into her fuzzy thoughts, just like a sly snake.

“Well, the High Priestess is skilled at making use of people. I’m sure not a single hair on the traitor’s body will be wasted. Best be careful not to damage the goods on our way home.”

Those words ringing through her fading consciousness, Citrina fell into darkness.

Just like the end of a wonderful dream...

Chapter 12: The Sophisticated Calculations of the Great Sage

The legendary Winged Horse: a pegasus that flew through the heavens. In full control of the grand sky above, it would be no exaggeration to say that it was a legendary being who was king of the sky.

But you see, that horse had a slightly different nuance in the Equestrian Kingdom than it did in Tearmoon. “A frigid foal’s sojourn” was an expression that referred to the first day of winter in the Equestrian Kingdom. There, winter appeared in the form of a horse, and so did the other seasons. Winter, fall, summer, and spring were all foals that ran through the plains.

And the Winged Horse? That was the same—weather phenomena were also steeds. Thus, as king of the sky, the horse was ruler of weather. Thunder was its whinny, wind its fluttering wings, and rain its shed tears.

The Winged Horse must have had dampened spirits on the second day of the Matching. Obsidian clouds wrapped the whole sky, and the Winged Horse that galloped through it could be heard crying in the distance. The violent flap of its wings created a wind that blew raucously through the fields that littered the mortal realm.

“The weather seems dreadful today. It looks like it could rain at a moment’s notice.”

Mia looked up to the sky, holding her hair in place with one hand as it danced in the wind. Then, her unpleasant prediction proved true. Drops of rain fell from the dark clouds just as she left camp. Luckily, it appeared that the Winged Horse had yet to fall too far into a slump, as the raindrops were still quite small in size. It was just a drizzle for now, at least...

“So it *did* start to rain. Dear moons...” Still quibbling, Mia pulled the hood of the fluffball suit over her head. Thanks to its double function as rain gear, Mia was impervious to rain! Well, at least to *this* much rain.

“Hmph, I was starting to get chilly. I’ll have to remember to thank Anne later.”

The parts of her skin that had been left exposed to wind felt chilled. It was as if autumn had suddenly passed them by, instead hailing in winter.

“That’s right, this was a year that was quite cold. I had completely forgotten,” she muttered as she looked ahead of her. The rain blurred the scenery, meaning a small lapse in care could leave her lost. “Let’s speed up a little, Dongfeng. We need to close the distance between us and Loklou a bit more.”

With a grunt, Dongfeng quickened his feet. Galloping through the dampened fields, Mia let out a small groan. “I hope Xiaolei avoids catching a cold...”

A strong gust of wind blew by as if to answer her. Then came a cute *achoo!* from Xiaolei.

Having found her in the rain, Mia called out to her. “Xiaolei, are you all right?”

Xiaolei kept her expression stiff. “I will not be playing friends with you, I do say. We are in the middle of the Matching.”

Saying that was all well and good, except...she immediately followed it up with a rub to her nose. Perhaps she had done so one too many times, as the tip of it was crimson.

“Yes, but...you seem quite cold.”

“Th-Th-This is nothing to an Equestri raised in the plains...I do say.”

Saying that was all well and good, except...her lips were tinted blue.

“I see. Still...”

Mia looked at the accompanying riders. New guards had taken over from Gongma and his crew during the night, and every single one met her gaze with a shake of their heads.

“We cannot lend you any aid. You have had those clothes with you since the beginning, Princess. Providing rain gear now would be unjust.”

“Hm... Well, in that case, why don’t we find a place to hide from the rain and sit around the fire? Then, once the rain is gone, we’ll—”

“Ha! Ha ha! I-I-I will not be fooled by your words, I do say. You simply want to rest your horse. You have worn such heavy clothing for the whole race, so your horse must be famished...I do say!” She looked back at Mia with a determined grin. “I do not want you to insult my pride any longer, I

do say. This is a Matching of Steeds, Princess. A fight that has it all on the line. And we must do so with all we have, I do say."

Xiaolei spoke through gritted teeth. Such words left Mia speechless, but...

This is really starting to feel like a serious battle! I need to soften things up a bit...

Mia was not a fan of being on edge. Once she had lost, she wanted not to be enemies but comrades who had overcome the same trial, and being on edge was not conducive to that goal. It was bound to lead her to worse treatment.

Hmph. Which means...

After some pontification, Mia reached a single conclusion.

...we need some sweets!

It was not that Mia just wanted some dessert. She was definitely not lamenting the fact that while her hotpot the previous night had been quite the treat, it didn't *end* with any treats. No, this was a sound conclusion based on meticulous calculation, a surmise that with some sweets shared between them, it would be hard for this to feel like a serious fight. A diagnosis based on sophisticated calculations (read: appetite) worked out by her deep intellect (read: stomach).

Mia turned to a Water Clan woman who was accompanying them. "Could I have a moment? I'd like something sweet."

"...Huh?" Mia's sudden request had left her lost for words.

"No, Princess. As we stated just moments before, aiding just *you* during the Matching of Steeds would be unjust, and..."

"Then there should be no problem if you give some to Xiaolei too," she replied readily with a mischievous smile. "You may not be aware, but I'm well-known as a selfish princess. This is nothing when it comes to selfishness from me! So you better keep on your toes."

After hearing those words, the Water Clan woman...thought. Why had Mia suddenly said such a thing? Based on the flow of the conversation, Mia must have felt sorry for Xiaolei. So just what was the sweet thing she was after?

The conclusion reached her suddenly. The Equestrian Kingdom had a drink known as arkhshu, which meant "wine-dreg milk." Flavorwise, it was

similar to hot milk, and it was made from the dregs leftover from the process of creating wine from horse milk. Drinking it hot would warm the bones, nullifying any signs of an oncoming cold.

I see, thought the woman of the Water Clan. *The princess is trying to warm her frigid opponent, and she is doing so through her own "selfishness"...*

The moment she came to this understanding, she was overcome with admiration for the Great Sage of the Empire's magnanimity, willing to spread her kindness to even her opponents.

"Hm. Well, it would be unbecoming of me to ignore the demands of a foreign princess."

With her command, a message raced its way across the plains, and piping hot arkhshu was prepared at the relay point.

In a later generation, this would prove the genesis of the proverb "to send warm arkhshu to your enemy." Well, anyway...the Matching of Steeds galloped ever forward toward its climax.

Chapter 13: Xiaolei's Pride

As Mia and Xiaolei traveled the dim plains, they suddenly came across the faint glow of a bonfire.

"Huh?"

Xiaolei was at a loss and quickly turned to Mia for an answer. However, Mia feigned ignorance. With a straight face, her only response was pulling her horse forward toward the flames. Xiaolei had thought to ignore it, but due to urges from the accompanying retinue, she had no choice but to follow.

The moment she alighted from her horse, she was handed a mug of steamy liquid. It was milk white in color, but what *really* drew Mia in was its sugary aroma.

By the moons, this is wonderful! The absolute ideal of a drink.

As soon as Mia got her paws around the mug, she started to blow on the steam. With each touch of it to her cheeks, they softened like melting ice. Then, with a mighty *huff huff*, she took a sip. As the drink spread across her tongue, she noticed it had a thickness to it. Inside her mouth, it felt just like a soup with egg cooked into its broth, but the only flavor that assaulted her tongue was the rich sweetness of honey. As her sip traveled from her throat to her stomach, warmth worked its way through her entire body. She couldn't help but sigh.

I see. So, they decided to provide us with something not only sweet, but something that would warm our cold bones. The Equestrian people really are considerate!

"Princess..."

While Xiaolei had taken the steaming cup in her hands, she looked at Mia in displeasure.

Mia decided to play dumb. "I want to make sure there are no misunderstandings between us. I only had this prepared because *I* wanted to drink it, and since I could only do so if you partook as well, I had them prepare some for you too."

Xiaolei glared back at her... Then, she exploded. “Princess, you really are just *too kind*, I do say!”

“My, I just—”

“I know. Each of your actions is meant to give your words weight, I do say! ‘The Matching of Steeds is not a war to exchange jabs.’ That is what you said, and this is all so that once a verdict is reached, we will still cooperate with one another. This is all to save me from regrets and future trouble, I do say!” Xiaolei looked at her own fist, which she clenched. “It would be dangerous to continue riding in such cold weather. Frostbite would make it difficult to grip the reins. There is a chance it could lead me to fall, and had I, we would not be able to end the Matching in high spirits.” Xiaolei looked absolutely full of herself as she spat out those words. “Is that not it, I do ask?”

“...Well, yes. I suppose so.”

Of course, that had not been the impetus for Mia’s suggestion. But going with that seemed like the best course of action—Mia’s inner jellyfish knew the folly it was to ride against a wave.

Xiaolei took a sip of her arkhshu. “Hmph. How sweet and tasty, I do say.”

Then, she breathed out a sigh. Her anger appeared to have boiled over as a gallant expression took to her countenance. “Princess Mia, the Matching of Steeds is a sacred ceremony. Thus, I do say I will not hold back. To give my all in the race, I plan to warm myself by the fire for a while, I do say. It would be dangerous for me to ride in my current state.”

“My, in that case, I think I’ll also—”

“You should head onward, I do say.”

“Huh? No, but...”

“I plan to do this because I believe it is my best chance at victory, I do say. Thus, I also wish for you to do what you deem to be your best chance.” She gave a determined grin. “Do not fret. Loklou is of the finest of finest steeds. I do say we’ll catch up to you in an instant! I vow to be right behind you by the time you reach that final hill, so you better prepare yourself! I do declare it!”

From her tone, Mia made a deduction.

So this won’t leave me with any debts to repay, will it?

And she was right. This was how Xiaolei chose to reach the end of the

race with no future troubles. Mia acknowledged her sense of pride with a nod.

"Understood. In that case, I will be eagerly awaiting your arrival!"

Then, she hopped on Dongfeng's back with a *hupty-doo!* before dashing off, sparing not even a glance back.

Oho! In any case, I seem to have gotten to be on good terms with Xiaolei. I shouldn't have anything to worry about if I lose now!

For a short while, Mia simply continued along with a grin at the pleasant rhythm of Dongfeng's footsteps. But then...she realized something.

Wait. Lose?

She looked behind her.

Xiaolei was nowhere to be seen. The distance between them grew ever wider.

By the moons... Could this be my chance?!

After all this time, Mia had finally hit upon the dazzling possibility of her victory. The faces of her comrades—cheering her on with complete faith in her eventual triumph—flitted through her mind. Messing up here, victory finally in her sights, might prove to bring her later misfortunes...

"W-Well! I guess that means I have no choice. Giddyap, Dongfeng!"

Sensing a surging wave pushing her forward, her voice swelled with fighting spirit! She adjusted her grip on the reins, making sure to pull them tight. Then, she rubbed Dongfeng's neck. He answered with a loud whinny. And then...

...he continued off! At the exact same speed he had been going!

Dongfeng had but one speed—his own.

Chapter 14: The Absurd Theory of a Certain Chief...Spreadeth like Wildfyre!

After parting ways with Xiaolei, Mia raced single-mindedly toward the goal. She spared no glances backward, her eyes tensely trained on what lay in front of her. The rain had yet to let up. Or rather, it had now mostly frozen into sleet. Still, Mia's fluffball suit was impervious to such cold.

New accompanying riders had taken duty at their resting point, and they now all wore similar attire. Among them was Gongma, who had overseen the crew the previous day.

"Preposterous. So this is why she chose such clothing..." he muttered in awe, recalling the question still nipping in his mind from the other day.

Just why had Mia chosen such attire? He had finally found his answer—adorned in such warmth, even the chilling rain would not slow her trot. But the issue with his theory was that yesterday, no one had predicted this change in weather. Was there really someone who could have foretold this sudden cloud cover and onset of cold?

"I see. Her Highness is skilled at sensing the temperament of the great Winged Horse," offered a rider from another clan, but Gongma shook his head.

It was true that Mia appeared to have completely divined this change in climate. But was that really true? Her hopes of winning the Matching of Steeds were next to nothing. Was it possible she had the fortuity to predict worsening weather and use it to her advantage? Or was this...?

"It is as if the Winged Horse has engendered this change herself."

The notion that Mia had given orders to the horse who ruled the heavens was preposterous. But despite its absurdity, now that it had left the mouth of the Wood Clan Chief, it was out of his hands. This sensational theory spread like wildfire through the accompanying retinue...and completely took hold of them! It made perfect sense (to them, a least)!

"A princess who commands the Winged Horse..."

With such *odd* phrases leaving their lips, they all gazed at Mia in a trance.

Bathed in their deep awe, Mia...didn't notice it at all. Instead, her whole being was focused on matching the *clop-clop* of Dongfeng's gait.

"Well, I don't think this is a bad pace..." she spoke to herself, her heart completely free of any thoughts besides the sight of the field in front of her.

In truth, she had spent much of the journey whispering to him words like, "Hey, Dongfeng. If you win, I'll have a tasty veggie cake made for you. How does that sound?" in attempts to cajole him, but she had stopped even that. (It is worth mentioning that the sight of her addressing her horse during the toughest leg of the Matching had left the accompanying Equestris in ecstatic awe at her deep appreciation for her steed, but anyway...)

Yes, Mia knew that the impossible was, in fact, impossible. That lesson had been one harshly learned, but no matter how strong her demands, there was no conjuring up what they didn't have. No abuse of her authority as Tearmoon's princess or any amount of selfishness could make the impossible possible—if there was no food or money to be had, that was the end of it. And the same could be said about Dongfeng's speed. Even if she commanded him to accelerate, if that was his limit, that was indeed his limit.

"I'm quite a novice when it comes to galloping anyway, so all I can do is believe in Dongfeng." Thus, Mia conformed herself to her horse. Riding along like a jellyfish with a still heart was all that was in her power. "And suddenly doing what one isn't used to will only lead to failure. This is something I can't rush."

When the revolution had sparked, even had she wanted to make a sudden escape, it would have been impossible to simply sit herself atop a horse and do so. That was the reason she was now training herself in the art of horsemanship in advance, even making the extra effort to practice longer horseback excursions. In an emergency, all you can do is what has been trained into you through an absurd amount of practice.

"This is the same. Just because I see the possibility of victory, I can't allow myself to rush things. Just as I have done until now, I will leave it all to Dongfeng."

They thus continued ever onward, only sparing the occasional stop at a watering hole. He took one step after another, then another, and then another, and Mia counted every single one. The passage of time escaped her, until suddenly, she felt the warmth of the sun from the sky above. She looked up. At some point, the rain had stopped. Fissures spread through the black clouds, revealing small patches of blue sky that shone warmth down to the Earth. And then, bathed in light, she saw a towering hill.

"My, could that be...?"

"Yes. The boulder that sits on its summit is the finish line," explained one of the Equestrian guards around her.

"I've finally made it! That was quite the journey."

"Princess Mia!" That fierce shout came from far in the distance, but it made its way to Mia's ears.

"So, you've made it, Xiaolei."

Mia turned behind her to find Loklou and Xiaolei bolting toward her. That same determined smile was on her face, which was now streaked with mud from splashes created by Loklou's crashing hooves. Doubt and worry had clearly left her, and it sparked a fighting flame in Mia's heart.

"I have no intention of losing either!" Mia roared as she flung off her fluffball suit, now damp and logged with rainwater. Light as a feather, she gallantly declared, "Forward, Dongfeng!"

...Still, to be honest, Mia really wasn't expecting much. Dongfeng was still trotting along at his usual pace. Against Loklou in a full-speed gallop, Mia thought he had no chance. But then, Dongfeng let out a whinny and...*sped up!*

"...Huh?"

Having just freed herself from excess weight, Mia felt like she was about to fly off. But that was only for an instant. In a panic, she braced her feet in the stirrups and did her best to maintain her posture.

"Hey! Wh-Why are you suddenly so fast?!" she shouted as she fused her torso to Dongfeng's back.

The final battle over the hill had begun!

Chapter 15: At the Ferocious Roar of Ye Princess, the Crowd Becometh Wilde

Stomp stomp! Hooves crashed into the earth.

Whoosh whoosh! The riders broke through a wall of wind.

Woot woot! The crowd became wild with cheers.

But there was only one thing Mia could focus on—continuing onward. She was assiduous in keeping her eyes trained forward, all while squinting them at the strong pressure of the oncoming wind. The road that led to their final destination of Stargrass Rock was an arduous one, littered with twists and turns. With the Matching of Steeds finally nearing its end, Dongfeng headed toward his goal with no hesitations.

Gusts of wind assaulted Mia's body as they continued to accelerate. Her hands had been freed from the reins and were now lifted high in the air as if she were trying to grab the sky.

"Gwaaaaaah!" Mia let out a ferocious roar, and the onlookers who had packed themselves onto both sides of the road let out a mighty cheer that could shake the earth.

...Well, rather than a ferocious roar, it was in truth more a shriek inspired by the fact she felt she was about to fall off her horse. In any case, the excitement of the crowd only increased as they watched Mia race up the hill, gallantly straddled upon her horse. For one, this was a complete upset. It was strange to think that any but Loklou could be leading the pack, but instead, it was a foreign princess who had pulled ahead. Not to mention that she now barreled toward the goal through inclement weather and rough terrain at a speed that had exceeded all expectations. Now in the last spurt, she had let out a mighty roar. That had to be it! There was no way her blood wasn't boiling, and let us not forget the opposing horse that kept ferociously to her tail. It would be impossible to not feel fired up in such circumstances. Impossible!

Through the crowd of cheers, Dongfeng dashed forward in a frenzy.

Having caught sight of the goal and now carrying a slightly lighter load, it was as if something had been set free in him, and his speed continued to rapidly increase. The sound of his hooves kicking through the dirt gradually increased in frequency, and Mia did everything she could to match their rhythm.

"Augh! I see you've finally put your all into this, Dongfeng!"

Mia was well acquainted with the quick Kuolan, but this astounded even her. Despite being on an incline, Dongfeng almost didn't slow at all. The sight of his brawny legs dashing through the air and blood pumping through his slender neck made her feel almost reassured.

"Well, bring it on! I've gotten used to this speed, so let's keep it up!"

Dongfeng once again whinnied in response. However, the *clop-clop* of hoofsteps was fast approaching. Loklou chased after, splashing mud into the air from the postrain sludge. At the hill's entrance, only five horse-lengths stood between them.

"I've finally caught up to you, I do say!"

Before they had left for the race, Xiaolei's neat and pretty riding gear and noble expression had been captivating. But now, that had all faded away, leaving only a girl who was crazy about horse riding. Being atop a horse, galloping at full speed, and racing to the finish line was something she found just so *fun*, and her horse-craziness was clear on her face.

"Well then! I do say this is a fight!" she exclaimed all the while wiping mud from her cheeks.

Her innocent joy left Mia certain of her victory. Yes, *Mia's* victory—to lose under the best of circumstances. That had always been Mia's plan. And now that it had come to fruition, she was carefree...to give her all in the fight!

"I won't be losing, Xiaolei!"

Mia was no fan of losing, but thinking it nice to sometimes lose herself in a pure battle, she put in everything she had.

“I’ll win, and then celebrate my victory with some tasty mushroom stew and a warm glass of arkhshu!”

Slimming up with some exercise had been another important goal of Mia’s, but that had long passed over the horizon of her memories. Escaping her F.A.T. was not something that would come easily. Anyway...

Sensing Loklou’s approach, Dongfeng twitched his ears. But his eyes stayed trained on the road ahead of him. The slope had been muddied by the rain. Taking his eyes off it was out of the question. Dongfeng galloped steadily and soundly toward his goal.

And then, the two steeds raced their way onto the hill. Despite the precipitous incline, Dongfeng’s legs held sound. His speed was steady, unlike Loklou who had started to falter. He flew up the hill as if weightless, and thus the swift Loklou was only able to slightly close the gap between them. Now, the difference was but four horse-lengths.

This was the greatest strength of the terretortues—whether they were faced with muddy sludge, boulders tumbling down mountain roads, downward slopes, upward slopes, whatever tough terrain there was to be had, their stout legs completely overcame it, galloping through as if it was nothing. Faced with adversity, they did not so much as even grit their teeth as they continued onward with an unchanged pace. Dongfeng exhibited perfectly the traits of Tearmoon’s prideful workhorses.

Mia was now at the final spurt, and Loklou had not passed her even once. The summit of the precipitous climb reached into the skies, and Mia followed it with her gaze. Above, she found a rainbow, there to congratulate the Matching’s winner.

Chapter 16: The Verdict

While Mia might have been first to enter the final dash, Loklou was right behind her, and inch by inch, the gap closed between them.

She really is fast, but she's even more stubborn!

Had Mia been racing on her own two legs, she would have given up the moment the path had turned into a climb.

Loklou's panting breath was close enough for her to feel, causing Mia to groan. Under the current situation, it was fine for her to lose. Still, being slowly approached from behind wasn't exactly the best feeling. And Loklou didn't stop at mere approach—at once she closed the distance between them, even coming in *front* as if she had suddenly grown larger. Now, they were perfectly adjacent. It was neck and neck!

"Augh! I won't accept defeat just yet! We're almost at the finish line!" She opened her mouth to give Dongfeng a pep talk. "Dongfeng, y—Gwaaah!"

With the sound of his name, he accelerated! Once again, Mia let out a "ferocious roar." Her vigor riled up the crowd even further. For one, Dongfeng had increased his speed with perfect timing. The battle had reached its defining moment. Equestris were connoisseurs of horse racing, and even to their eyes, it was clear this was a watershed moment. Now at the end of a long race, the overtook became the overtaken, and *that* was when Dongfeng had accelerated. It was a move meant to crush his opponent's heart.

"How valiant the princess looks roaring loud at this decisive moment... She really is not one to be overestimated." While uttered by one of Gongma's crew, none found his words at all strange.

"Not yet, I do say! Loklou!"

Xiaolei let out a shout to rival Mia's own. Loklou accelerated, fervently keeping to Dongfeng's tail.

"I will not lose! It's out of the question, I do say!"

Loklou rushed forward as if pushed by Xiaolei's passion. Once again,

the gap slowly closed between them, until finally the tip of Loklou's nose overtook them. Dongfeng accelerated, as if to declare his hopes of victory. A hairbreadth apart, they took turns overtaking and being overtaken. Their skills were equal, and their fervor matched.

In battles so even, the smallest of factors are often what dictate victory. And quietly, such a factor made its appearance—wind. Chilling gales had been blowing all day, but it now had changed its course. It blew down the hill, becoming a headwind to obstruct the two riders. It was mean-spirited, as if its aim was to beat down challengers to the heavens. But that strong gust was met with *another* wind, which climbed the hill as if only air was beneath its feet—Dongfeng, named after the Eastern Wind, stood strong against these gales, pushing his way up the hill ferociously. Just like the breeze that carried spring, his gallop was both strong and carefree. It was weightless, light as if he was the Legendary Winged Horse itself.

Faced with these strong winds, Mia tucked her face to her chest. "I'll leave everything to you, Dongfeng! Onward!"

At Mia's words, Dongfeng let out the loudest of whinnies. Not losing any momentum, he flew right over the finish line!

For a moment, all was silent. Then came...thunderous applause!

Reflexively, Mia lifted her head. Next to her, Xiaolei and Loklou were nowhere to be seen. Flustered, she turned behind her, only to find the two just now reaching the end.

"Oh... I lost...I do ask?" muttered Xiaolei, looking as if all the liveliness had flushed from her face.

Seeing this, Mia was ready to pat her chest in relief. But then, disaster struck.

"Ah..."

A strong gust of wind had started to topple Xiaolei.

"Huh...?"

The moment it was all over, a small chink broke in her spirits. After two days of a nonstop marathon, Xiaolei was much more exhausted than she had anticipated, and that cold wind was enough to...

"Xiaolei!"

Panicked, Mia extended her hand. But naturally, it was too far away to

reach. Xiaolei's body had been pushed backward as if the wind was trying to take her away. She began to fall head-first to the ground below, but then...

"I will not let there be any faults to find in the victory of my dear friend Princess Mia!"

At the shout of that gallant voice, a gray shadow closed in. Taking Xiaolei's collar in its mouth, the wolf made its landing. Xiaolei had now fallen on her backside, and she looked to the wolf in front of her with eyes the size of dinner plates.

"O-Oh... A w-w-wolf?" The color rapidly drained from her face. In a panic, the other Equestris started to approach her, but...

"D-Did you just save me...I do ask?"

Still trembling, she looked to the wolf, and then to the girl walking toward her—Ka Aima.

"Had her opponent suffered injury, Princess Mia would not be able to take glee in her victory. As her friend, I could not let you fall."

"I-I see. Um, Aima? Could I pet him, I do ask?"

"Indeed. He will not bite...probably."

"You do say... Hm? 'Probably'?!"

Xiaolei jumped to her feet, but Aima brushed it off with a laugh.

"Ha ha ha! That is only a joke. Without such orders, he will not bite."

"I don't think that is much of a joke, I do say!"

With an exasperated sigh, Xiaolei touched her hand to the wolf's neck.

"Thank you for saving me."

Despite her apology, the wolf simply averted his eyes as if he had nothing to do with it. Instead, he yawned.

Thus, the Matching of Steeds had reached a verdict. But just what would the Eastern Wind blown by Mia Luna Tearmoon, Great Sage of the Empire, bring to the Equestrian Kingdom? That was a question for another day.

Chapter 17: Atop the Winged Horse of Delusion

“Ah... Thank goodness. Things seemed a bit hairy there for a moment...” Seeing his beloved daughter saved by Ka Aima, Fuma let out a deep sigh of relief.

“Ho! That was quite the Matching of Steeds indeed. Was it not, Chief Fuma?” The nonchalant voice came from Kuoma, eldest of the chiefs, who had been watching over the race’s conclusion. “Who would have thought this would be the result? Pelted with rain, assaulted by cold winds...this Matching has been littered with unpredictable events.”

“Well...you may be right.” Fuma was lost in thought. Thus, it was Gongma that answered in his place. “Were it not for the rain, the princess would have certainly been defeated. Loklou is just that excellent a steed. And yet...”

As an accompanying rider, Gongma had watched the race from up close. Thus, he wore a know-it-all look as he asseverated...his (delusional) conclusion.

“I believe her victory was a result of meticulous calculations. It all began on the first day, when she was lured into a riverside battle.”

On a flat plain, Mia’s position was unpropitious. However, on a riverbed, a Tearmoon horse would have the advantage over the sheltered Loklou.

“Xiaolei believed her knowledge of the terrain had given her the upper hand, but she was mistaken. Princess Mia seemed to be terribly enjoying herself, and she wore the innocent smile of a child whose plans had come to fruition.”

Horse races required strategy—how should you limit the power of your opponent, and how should you bring out the power of your own steed? It required constant adjustment, and there were none in the Equestrian Kingdom who did not know the joy of a horseback aim fulfilled.

“After being deceived at the river, Xiaolei lost her composure. As a result, she mistook the qualities that defined the Tearmoon horses that the princess rode. They are not particularly speedy, but they are strong. Should its herd be attacked, that horse would assuredly survive. I felt the stubbornness of survival within him. Even if his legs are not the fastest, he pays no mind to the terrain it traverses.”

After analyzing Dongfeng with another know-it-all look, Gongma’s face grew grim.

“But that would not have been enough to make up the difference had it not been for the downpour on the second day...”

Due to the rain, Xiaolei had grown so chilled that riding had become impossible. However, Mia had made the proper preparations. The traits of her steed must have played a part as well—the Tearmoon horse’s gait had remained unaffected by the cold.

“The princess also consistently did not force an excessive speed. Knowing her horse from tail to snout, she saved his power until the final incline.”

...Had she?

“Hills are even more strenuous when muddied by rain. She foresaw as much and steadily made progress while encouraging her steed.”

...Had she really?

“On the other hand, Loklou pushed herself too hard in order to close the gap. Zapped of her strength, she could not reach a quick-enough gallop. Had she been at full power, things would have proved different.”

Had the hill not been muddied and hard to run on...

Had Xiaolei not pushed for a silly battle on the first day and instead saved her horse’s strength...

Had she not been wet with rain and forced to warm herself by the fire...

Should a single one of these possibilities not come to fruition, the race would have resolved with a different end. During the two-day Matching, many unfavorable factors had piled up to steal Loklou’s strength. On the other hand, Dongfeng had spent the two days saving his strength for the very end so that he could adjust to any situation. These were the direct causes of the Matching’s final results.

“I see. So the princess chose her horse through predicting even the weather. I have heard rumors that she can converse with the Legendary

Winged Horse, but it seems this is not full folly," Mayun said, absolutely astounded.

"She may perhaps be able to persuade the Winged Horse herself to change the weather." In contrast, Gongma said something *strange* with a completely straight face. But then...

"Cometh from a lande yonder be thy Princess of thy Winged Horse. Let she bestoweth upon us harmony..." Elder Kuoma, chief of the Wind Clan and the person who should have the steadiest head, jumped on the bandwagon!

Hearing such plausible phrasing, Mayun couldn't help but question them. "Do we have such a legend?"

"No, not in our past. But in a century, we might just have one," responded Kuoma with a carefree grin. He looked to be truly and thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Well, in any case, I am certain that even that unforetold downpour was what the princess wanted to impress upon us."

"Hm? What do you mean, Elder Kuoma?" asked Gongma with an inquisitive look.

Kuoma's countenance remained calm. "You do not understand? The princess has criticized us Equestris for our hubris. She stated that no horse could be ranked above another. Do these results not prove those exact words?" Kuoma squinted his eyes as if staring at the sun itself as he gazed upon Mia's horse in the distance. "We prize our moonhares as the swiftest of steeds. But all horses were originally a gift bestowed upon us from the heavens. It is presumptuous of us to declare some of those gifts as better than others."

"No horse can be ranked above another..." Fuma suddenly muttered with a scowl.

Kuoma addressed him. "Moonhares have the strengths of moonhares, and Tearmoon horses have strengths of their own. These are merely differences in qualities, not worth. In certain instances, Tearmoon horses can surpass moonhares. Is that not what the princess means to state? That it is arrogance to debate the worth of a horse based on our own sense of values? I also believe..."

He slowly closed his eyes before continuing.

"I also believe...she meant to identify our intolerance for refusing to

welcome the wolf-domesticating Fire Clan." He took a deep breath.

"Elder Kuoma, I do not—"

"We shall not walk the same path as those who walk with wolves... Should such words truly be so absolute? Are our values—nay, our traditions—so firm as to deny brethren who share our blood?"

The elder's questions were quiet, but sharp.

"Do you mean to say that Princess Mia does not mean to convince us using the results of the Matching alone?"

The question had been asked by Mayun, but it was Gongma who answered, as he had seen the race Mia ran more personally than anyone.

"I see. Those words ring true. The princess's knowledge of horses runs deep. Had victory been her only goal, she would not have needed to suffer so hard in the battle. The horse she chose was a Tearmoon, one strong on tough roads, and she ran a race that would highlight such a steed." He testified, surely knowing Mia's strategies better than anyone. "That was undoubtedly all the machinations of an all-seeing sage."

Yes, *despite* having seen exactly the way Mia ran her race...he absolutely asserted *this*!

"But her plans would have not come to fruition if it weren't for the rain, no?"

Mayun offered incredibly sensible dissent, but Gongma answered with a shake of his head that brimmed with confidence.

"As I previously stated, she commanded the Winged Horse itself to cause such downpour."

"The Winged Horse, you say..."

The "Mia equals Princess of thy Winged Horse" theory was suddenly gaining plausibility. How terribly frightening.

"A princess who commands the Legendary Winged Horse...the Princess of Thy Winged Horse."

They all recalled the final sprint up that hill. She had hastily made her way to the top as if the horse she rode had sprouted wings—as if she were riding the Legendary Winged Horse herself.

"A princess who commands the Winged Horse...cometh from a land yonder. I see. You may indeed be right."

Mayun, wise and reserved (at least, he should have been), jumped on the gleeful-yet-delusional bandwagon!

Thus, these notable chiefs of the Equestrian Kingdom took a simpleminded ride on the Winged Horse of delusion and soared into the skies above.

Chapter 18: Long-Awaited Connections

After Mia had safely concluded the Matching of Steeds and alighted to the ground below, a certain man approached.

"Princess, what a wonderful Matching that was." This was San Fuma, chief of the Mountain Clan.

"Oh, Chief Fuma."

Mia blinked her eyes, somewhat taken aback by his honest praise. The reaction was so natural that all Fuma could do was give a wry grin.

He had never even imagined that he could have such sunny thoughts at this moment.

I had vowed in my heart to never let go of Loklou, even in death. Yet...

When he closed his eyes, there was a scene there to greet him—two young girls enjoying themselves from the bottom of their hearts. At first, he had taken displeasure at the mud that dirtied Loklou's coat. He was even angry, furious that Xiaolei had ridden her in such a way that it sullied the fur he had taken such painstaking care of. But with one look at Xiaolei enjoying herself on Loklou's back as the horse excitedly ran up the hill, a new emotion blossomed in his chest.

I want to ride a horse, and I want to do it now!

That was his thought!

Of course, he was moved by the sight of his actual daughter Xiaolei riding a steed in glee with his "daughter" Loklou happily galloping around with Xiaolei on her back. But what hit harder was the feelings he held as a citizen of the Equestrian Kingdom.

I want to ride in a passionate horse race just like that. Just when had I forgotten the joy of taking atop a horse's back?

Whether the horse was slow or fast, it was truly of no consequence. It mattered not what type of steed. All he needed was to ride a horse with nothing else in mind. That was enough to get his heart pumping with joy

coursing through its veins. How could he have forgotten something so obvious?

How I wish for such a blood-boiling neck and neck race of my own...

Mia and Xiaolei's honest match had resurrected these feelings within him. It was an urge he had felt when young—to ride his horse forever and to wherever, faster than the birds or the wind.

Pushing down the impulse to hop on his horse and run off, Fuma gave Mia a deep bow of honest gratitude, directed to the person who had made him remember life's greatest joy after a long, long time. Then...

"It may pain me, but it is you who best suits the swift Loklou, Princess. I graciously bestow her to you," he said, his mind finally cleared.

Oh, right. These were the rules.

Fuma's praiseful words had left Mia taken by surprise, but she quickly figured out his aim.

Oho! So you were thinking the same thing I was, Fuma.

Once the Matching of Steeds had concluded, there were no ill feelings left behind. That would prove a benefit in the future. Mia had deceptively picked up that *this* was what Fuma was trying to get across in order to not have to let go of his precious Loklou.

People are born with the glasses of values in their heart, and they view people through them.

Well, he has a point. Even if I got Loklou now, it would only create future problems. My best course of action is to refuse the horse to create a debt he'll feel obligated to pay back.

After some quick calculations, Mia gave a calm smile. "Yes, I am aware of the rules, of course. Should I wish for Loklou, you would have no choice but to hand her over. But if I—your opponent—do not wish for such, then..."

"Do you mean to say...you have no use for my Loklou?" he muttered, his voice suddenly growing deeper. His countenance had gone through a sudden transformation—now, he was glaring.

Augh! This is such a pain!

Both accepting and refusing would bring their own troubles. Mia was stuck between a rock and a hard place, leaving her at her wit's end.

Mia didn't really want Loklou in the first place. If she had to make an escape, she only need borrow Kuolan. Plus, Dongfeng had proved himself

to be a reliable steed as well. Therefore, she had no need for Loklou if it meant buying Fuma's enmity. When it came to horses, Mia was much more fond of the stuck-up or reliable older-brother types!

If anything, Loklou is more like a sheltered princess. I don't know if I can quite rely on her.

Mia got the feeling that if she tried to ride Loklou without any thoughts in her head, Loklou wouldn't be able to make a proper escape. But at the same time, refusal would be the same as failing to acknowledge Loklou's true worth, which would *also* put a damper on Fuma's mood. It was a terribly frustrating predicament.

I'm in trouble. I can't just say I'm not interested since I don't ride. Not after I proved myself as a rider who can hold one's own against an Equestri...

Mia sometimes gets a bit ahead of herself, but she *is* the inventor of the Jellyfish method of Horsemanship, after all.

Mia thought deep, searching for a way to refuse Loklou while also not landing any blows on Fuma's pride.

So what I need to do is make a firm refusal while also *expressing that I actually* do *want to receive Loklou. Hm... In that case...*

"There is no doubt that Loklou is a fine horse. After facing her in the Matching of Steeds, I know that better than anyone."

First, she buttered Fuma up. That was the foundation of her techniques. Then...

"However, I believe that excellence is *because* it was Xiaolei who rode her. Do you not feel the same?"

She added a reason to *not* receive her. Loklou was an amazing horse. But those amazing qualities were one with her rider. In other words, Loklou would lose half her excellence the moment she passed into Mia's hands. At least, that was what Mia was trying to impress on him. This was flattery at its finest, and to it, she added a reason to avoid having to take on another horse.

Faced with this...Fuma opened his eyes in shock!

"H-How dare you! Y-You would have me hand over Xiaolei as well?!"

It was a preposterous exclamation, and Xiaolei...silently nodded her head.

"Father...I have also faced off against Princess Mia. As the defeated, I

have no right to butt in, I do say. Should the princess wish it, I will gladly __"

"No! That is not what I meant. I am the princess of the Tearmoon Empire. I would never wish for slaves!"

Mia rebutted at the speed of light. In fact she *exceeded* the speed of light, laying out her counterargument so fast it beat time itself. She was an extratemporal being.

Just what in the moons are they saying?!

Her eyes darted around in panic. Holy Lady Rafina getting the wrong idea and believing that Mia was demanding a slave was something Mia wanted to avoid at all costs. Such a proposition would only lead to her being attacked by a cabal of angry guillotines.

...But strangely, Rafina was nowhere to be seen. Ludwig, Anne, and Bel were also missing.

My, did something happen?

She had her doubts, but Mia decided to focus on the task at hand.

"That is not what I meant, Chief Fuma. I was deeply moved by the strong bond between Loklou and Xiaolei, and I have built a bond between Dongfeng and myself as well. While it may not be to the degree of the others present, I understand exactly what that bond means."

There was a group who gave a solemn nod at Mia's words—her accompanying riders from the second day. They had heard Mia's desperate pleas of "Dongfeng, could you go just a bit faster? I'll give you cake if you do!" and had been deeply moved.

"You speak quite humbly, Princess. We have seen the care you gave your steed when met with exhaustion. There are none who would deny the strong bond shared between you."

"...Yes. I am happy to hear you say so." For a second, she had no idea what he was saying, but she decided to just nod along. Then, she cleared her throat. "Um... Yes, that's right. That bond is incredibly precious. It is shared between a horse and its human rider, and there is no one who should come between that bond. That is what I believe. So..."

Mia took a moment to observe her onlookers. At some point, many Equestris had gathered to hear her speak, and they all looked to her with the kind and amicable eyes of a horse. Right now...Mia felt they would accept anything she said!

She took a step forward. “I do not wish to sever bonds, but to forge new ones.” Then, she turned to Xiaolei. “I wish for wonderful friends who will lend a hand in times of need.”

Mia hoped for something a bit different from an alliance. She understood the need for relations between countries built from shared gains, but...honestly, she didn’t want to use her head too much. It was a pain. She wanted to leave all that stuff to Ludwig.

Thus, what she hoped for was something a bit more convenient—friendship that casts aside complicated calculations of profits and losses. The Southern Capital of the Equestrian Kingdom was positioned quite nicely. Should anything happen in Tearmoon, it would be an excellent place to stop on her escape route.

The Equestrian Kingdom could prove quite reliable. I absolutely need to form a bond of friendship here!

Mia looked to Xiaolei. “So, Xiaolei...I would be grateful if you became my friend.”

Xiaolei let out a small gasp. Then, in silence...she nodded.

Thus, Mia gained some long-awaited connections—both the Equestrian Kingdom full of skilled cavalry, and a person who could influence the Kingdom of Remno, located to the Equestrian Kingdom’s Southeast.

Chapter 19: Mia Bolsters Her Point

After finishing discussions with the Mountain Clan, Mia once again headed for Feng Kuoma. He stood atop Stargrass Rock, and the other chiefs had fortunately come to surround him, making this a perfect opportunity.

I was planning on losing, so I haven't thought about how I should approach this conversation at all, but now that I've won, I should take the opportunity to make my point.

Mia made an imperious march over to the chieftains. But suddenly, she realized that all their eyes were trained on her...as if she were the moon itself!

Oho! Well, I am *the winner of the Matching, after all. It's only natural that I'd attract their attention.* Mia took maybe a bit more than a short while to relish in the delight of it all. Then, she regained her focus.

They say that a shared meal lasts until dessert's last bite of cake. I can't let my guard down just yet!

Be humble... Be modest...

Mia could not just demand that she was worthy of being listened to just because she had proved superior in a battle of skill. That would only beget enemies. Winning felt good, but she couldn't let herself get too carried away in drinking the sweet nectar of victory.

"To all the chiefs and those who watched the Matching of Steeds."

Mia first addressed the chiefs, then the rest of the onlookers.

"The heavens were on my side today, and thus I proved victorious. No rather, it was *also* thanks to smaller coincidences that helped me through the entire journey. I do not believe I won with skill. Xiaolei was the most excellent of riders, and Loklou the most excellent of horses. I wish to extend the applause to them as well."

First, she raised Xiaolei up.

"It is also true that the Matching has left us with results. To use the words of your great founder, Kuolong, 'Differed opinions shall only be battled over during the Matching of Steeds. After, let us abide by that which

hath won.’”

She simultaneously affirmed that it had already been determined that the Fire Clan would be welcomed and threw in some words Xiaolei had shared with her. Using the words of their treasured founder, Mia bolstered her point! Authority could always be borrowed, and doing so was one of Mia’s oldest tricks.

“I am certain that the twelve clans of the Equestrian Kingdom and the Fire Clan can once again walk hand in hand. You are all of the same founder, after all.”

Mia took a pause to gather her thoughts.

I’ve offered up both the results of the Matching and the authority of their founder...but will this really be enough to convince them?

After some pontification...she found her answer! It was in fact *not* enough. Mia recalled a common excuse—we tried, but it actually didn’t work out! She had heard it time and time again during the revolution, and she had made hefty use of it herself. In which case...

Mia quietly opened her eyes to continue her speech. “I am certain there will be difficulties, and it will require patience and perseverance. That is something that can be foreseen even now. But one day...” She took a deep breath and placed her hand over her heart. “One day, I believe that you will all be able to walk forward as one people. Thus, what I ask of you is persistent effort. To build that bond piece by piece while never giving up.”

Mia made *sure* they weren’t going to turn around and declare, “Actually, this *didn’t* work out”! The Matching of Steeds had reached a verdict, and even their founder says to abide by it. So even if things *don’t* work out, they can’t just easily give up! They have to put in the proper effort until the very end! With that, Mia reiterated her point.

“And once the twelve clans again become thirteen, I hope to build an even deeper bond between the Tearmoon Empire and the Equestrian Kingdom.”

The Equestrian Kingdom was one of peculiar qualities. There was no king, but instead twelve chiefs. Thus, there was little point in getting friendly with just one clan. Mia had determined that it would prove to her future benefit to create a familiar relationship now while all the chiefs were gathered together, and she worked that point with everything she had!

“I extend my offer not just to Xiaolei. I hope to form bonds of friendship

with those from every clan.” Mia both loudly and merrily tied her speech together.

So that’s a wrap on everything! Perfect!

Mia was feeling incredibly proud of herself. That’s when Ludwig rushed over.

Oho ho! I really outdid myself this time. That stupid four-eyes is running over here, but even he *won’t be able to find any fault with my wonderful speech!*

But Mia’s confidence metamorphosed into anxiety when she saw the serious look on Ludwig’s face.

H-Huh? Did I mess something up?

Mia’s eyes darted about her surroundings in fear.

“Your Highness, you have my deepest apologies.” Before he could open his mouth, Ludwig’s head was lowered in a bow.

“U-Um, is something the matter?”

“Lady Citrina went missing last night.”

“...Huh?” Mia’s mouth opened in shock at that sudden revelation. “Wh-What? What do you mean?”

For a moment, it was mayhem, and Ludwig’s next words made her head spin.

“The guard on duty has stated he plans to take responsibility as soon as the matter is resolved...”

It was preposterous. Her sense of danger was triggered.

“You understand, don’t you, Ludwig? That would be completely unnecessary. Tell him that if he believes he has failed, it is best to make up for it with results.”

The Princess Guard was Mia’s lifeline. With each person lost, that thread grew thinner—it was a fear that Mia’s chicken heart could not bear.

“In any case, we need to hurry and find her. Let us ask for aid from the Equestrian Kingdom.”

With that, Mia turned to look at her new friends.

Chapter 20: The High Priestess and Citrina

The Chaos Serpents made their base in the deepest depths of the forest, in castle ruins that had been lost to time. But today, Valentina Remno, High Priestess of the Serpents, was visited by a peculiar guest. She had been sat at her table enjoying some afternoon tea, and she addressed her visitor—Ka Kunlou—with a kind smile.

"It's been quite a while, Kunlou. I didn't think you'd return. I'm rather surprised."

"Well, High Priestess, those are quite the words. You saw me off with a warm promise that this was my home that I could return to at any time. Where'd you think I would go?"

"Tee hee! You really are one for convenient misremembering, Kunlou. It was at the village of the Fire Clan that I bid you farewell. Of course, I will gladly welcome you, but..." She glanced at what lay beside him. "You can't treat a young lady so harshly."

On the other side of her gaze was a girl who had been strapped to a chair. The delicate arms of the honey-haired Etoiline Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon were bound, stopping her movements. She squirmed her body in discomfort, but no words fell from her lips—she had been gagged and blindfolded.

"You bully her, the poor thing," she spat.

Kunlou looked truly upset. "Oh, stop it. You can't compare me to Jem and Barbara. Their violence was malice, but I'm not doing this to be mean. I was just worried she'd bite her tongue."

"There's no need to worry about that. She perfectly understands that it would cause trouble for Her Highness Mia should she perish."

Kunlou hung his head, confused. "You think? She won't eat anything, and I've had to force-feed her all her water. She seems like she's ready to leave this sorrowful world..."

There was a stain on Citrina's collar that seemed to prove those words.

"You still have much to learn of people's hearts. Wasn't she simply worried you would poison her? I'm sure you used something suspicious to knock her out."

She took to her feet with an exasperated sigh, causing her beautiful hair to sway. Then, she bowed before Citrina and removed the cloth from her mouth with a kind touch. Citrina let out a gasp—she must have been in pain. Next, Valentina removed the blindfold. Having been covered for a long time, she squinted her eyes at the blinding light. She looked about the room with a scowl.

"Where...am I?" she croaked with a cough.

"This is one of the bases of the Chaos Serpents, located deep in the woods not far from the Kingdom of Remno. We've repurposed these ruins," she sang with a peaceful grin. "And my name is Valentina. Valentina Remno. I am the High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents."

"...Huh?" At first her response was dazed, but once she understood those words, her eyes grew wide.

"Hah... What a shame. I went through all the trouble of covering her eyes, but after telling her all this we won't be able to just let her go." Kunlou shrugged with little remorse.

Valentina shook her head. "As I said, you can't be threatening young ladies, Kunlou. You went through the trouble of capturing her alive. Of course we wouldn't needlessly kill her now," she said with a kind smile before turning toward Citrina. "I'll keep you alive and make proper use of you. I just thought of the perfect idea— Oh?"

Something suddenly caught her eye. She traced her finger down Citrina's slender neck, causing her to jolt. A thin string was tied around it, and Valentina used her finger to scoop it up and pull it toward her.

"My... This is..."

"Ah...!" she choked out.

Valentina ignored her, continuing to pull at the thread. Eventually, something appeared from Citrina's collar...a troya.

"Tee hee! My, this is quite cute for a backstabber."

Valentina snapped the troya off her neck and began playing with it in her hands.

"N-No... Don't. Please...give it back."

“Hee! I can’t do that.”

Her voice was nonchalant, as if teasing a child. She swung the troya from side to side.

“This seems like something that will comfort you, so I won’t be giving it back. I mean, if you had this...I wouldn’t be able to break you, would I?”

She looked to Citrina with the cold and pleading eyes of a snake. But they quickly faded into the innocent eyes of a mischievous child.

“Hee hee! Just kidding. The real reason I’m holding on to this is so I can send it to *her* and lure *her* here.”

“Her...?”

“Why, the Great Sage of the Empire Mia Luna Tearmoon, of course!” She handed the troya to Kunlou. “I’ll be having you stay here until we’ve made the proper preparations. Oh, that’s right. Can you change and take care of yourself? All the men here are crude, but I can assign someone to look after you.”

She cast a glance at Kunlou. Citrina frantically shook her head. Valentina took a moment to observe her pallor countenance frozen in terror before touching her hand to Citrina’s face. She stroked her cheeks as if to comfort her.

“Your face is quite cute, all frozen in fear, but...hee hee! That’s partially for show, isn’t it?” She stared straight into Citrina’s eyes. “Even when you were gagged and blindfolded, you made sure to pay careful attention to the conversation between Kunlou and me. Your head was full of thoughts about how you could gather information, and how you could use it to your advantage. Am I wrong? Just now you were probably relieved you could get away without being observed. You’re pretending to be afraid to try and get me to act carelessly, aren’t you?”

For a moment, Citrina’s expression fell blank. But then it became a smile, lovely as a blooming wildflower.

“There really is nothing that can cloud your eyes, High Priestess. Are the rumors true that you can even see through people’s hearts? Your name suggests that you’re a royal of Remno...or perhaps you’re just trying to convince Rina of such?”

She stared back up with searching eyes.

“Oh my, the young Etoiline of the Yellowmoon House really is strong of heart.” She clapped her hands and laughed. “That’s right. It would be to

your convenience should I be lying about my name since it would mean I intended to have you bring back faulty intel to the Tearmoon princess. But unfortunately, I really am Valentina Remno, first princess of the Kingdom that shares my name."

"But what does revealing that to Rina get you?" she asked with a cute tilt of her head.

"Well, I wouldn't mind telling you, but... Yes, if talks are going to get long, we might as well have some tea. I was hoping to do this with Aima, but I do think it would be nice to have a good chat with you as well," she said with an impish wink. "It's a shame to always be surrounded by such vulgar men. I desperately lack a partner for a tea party. If you'll entertain me, I'll gladly tell you anything."

"Tee! Understood. It is an honor to receive an invitation from the High Priestess herself."

Then, Citrina grinned. It was the perfect smile of a young woman, one that would tug on anyone's heartstrings. Valentina's lips were still stuck in a full-faced grin of their own as she moved them toward Citrina's ear and whispered...

"But, first..."

Valentina could tell she had tensed. She continued her words teasingly. "You need to take a bath. You stink of sweat."

"Huh?!"

That had been unexpected. Citrina's mouth twitched into a scowl before her cheeks turned pink. Her anger and shame were on full display—it was the countenance of a true young lady.

Thus, Valentina had found a foothold into the true self that Citrina hid behind her facade of a sweet smile. Like a snake, she silently slid herself into the crack.

“That’ll have your friends hating you, you know?”

Citrina confidently denied such with a shake of her head. “No, they won’t. Bel wouldn’t hate me over something so mi...nor...”

She turned her head upward to find Valentina glaring down at her. Immediately, panic filled her face.

“Hee hee! I see. So her name is Bel. She must be really important to you. Could she be the one who made you the troya?”

Citrina bit her lip. She would stay silent. She looked down, avoiding Valentina’s gaze.

“Hee! You’re so clever, it’s precious. You’re right in staying silent to stop yourself from letting out any secrets. Well, what you *really* should have done is avoided making any reactions at all no matter how deep I dug, but this will pass as well.” She giggled and looked once again into Citrina’s eyes. “Although...the High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents might just be capable of reading people’s minds anyways...”

Citrina stayed silent, squeezing her eyes shut in a desperate attempt to escape. Valentina watched for a while, but eventually, she stood.

“That friend must really be important to you. I see. You won’t become a Serpent. Anyone who values something so much can’t.” Her voice grew singsongy. “Oh yes, tea! I’m very much looking forward to it. Let’s have a nice, *long* chat.”

Chapter 21: Blown About with Bated Breath

It was just before Mia had passed over the finish line that Ludwig learned of Citrina's disappearance. While they could not interfere in the Matching of Steeds, Ludwig, Dion, and a few others from the Princess Guard had been traveling with Mia from a few paces behind, ready to jump to her aid whenever the need arose. At the end of the two-day journey, Ludwig could finally breathe a sigh of relief as he watched Mia climb that final hill...until an urgent message was brought to him—the young daughter of the Yellowmoons had gone missing from their lodgings in the Southern Capital the previous night.

Recently, the Holy Lady had taken command of the search with help from the Forest Clan. However, they lacked leads. The search party had returned immediately. Hearing this news, Ludwig couldn't help but curse under his breath.

This is all due to my miscalculations... I was sure that if anyone in the group were to be targeted, it would be Her Highness.

The Serpents currently controlled warriors of the Fire Clan, one of their most adept able to command wolves. Thus, Ludwig had been wary of the possibility of attack even during the Matching. However...

"I've gravely mistaken our enemy. It was only during the previous few days that the Matching had been decided upon, much less Her Highness's participation. Even the Chaos Serpents would find it difficult to pursue her under those circumstances..."

Ludwig gritted his teeth, almost cracking under the weight of his responsibility.

"No. I think you were right in all this." Suddenly, Dion Alaia offered his opinion. He wore a bitter smile as he gave a slight shrug. "You can't plan for everything. As a vassal to the princess, prioritizing *her* safety makes perfect sense. Plus, it's not like protection at the Southern Capital was thin

either. If one of our enemies was able to kidnap the little Yellowmoon, it just means they were that skilled. For now...” His eyes took on the hint of a dangerous glint. “For now, we’ve just gotta do what we can. It’s a shame, but once she crosses that finish line, we better head straight for the Southern Capital and have her take the reins.”

The next most likely turn of events would be the Serpents taking advantage of the confusion to make a pass on Mia’s life. Thus, they needed to avoid doing the unwise, such as splitting their forces, and instead keep their army centered around Mia as they focused their efforts on the search for Citrina.

And of course, more than anything, it would be folly to not make use of the Great Sage of the Empire in their search.

“Yes, you’re right... That would be best.”

Ludwig gave a nod, nudged up his glasses, and headed straight for Mia. Now was not the time to be caught up in responsibility. He set himself straight, resolving to wait for whatever Mia would sentence him to once everything was resolved. The letters of resignation that had fallen to him from their guards would have to wait as well. Silently, he began to plan for what was to come.

Thus, they worked hand in hand with the chiefs of the Equestrian Kingdom on a grand search, but Citrina’s whereabouts remained a mystery. Chief Fuma of the Mountain Clan had offered up a room. This is where Mia currently was, furrowing her brow in worry at the most recent report.

“Could she have been kidnapped by a trafficker?” asked Mia. “Rina is a relative of mine, after all, so she is quite cute...”

“Well, maybe if we weren’t in the city, but inside it? I doubt it... The Southern Capital seems safe. Plus, I don’t think such a cunning young miss would fall victim to just your average human trafficker,” offered Dion.

“Hmph...”

Mia couldn’t help but groan at his judgment. It was true—Citrina quietly being taken by any old scoundrel was hard to imagine.

“Yes, it seems more likely that she would use poison to take care of things herself. Which leaves...”

“I believe it is best to assume that she has fallen into the hands of the Serpents.” Ludwig made his assertion calmly.

Mia sighed. “Yes, you are right. That means...”

Mia crossed her arms and began to think. Luckily, the source of her sagacity was right before her—Malong had prepared some hot sarpir sheep milk! The long-awaited delicious milk sat right on the table before her. It was an excellent beverage, smooth as fresh cream, fragrant, and mildly sweet. The fact that the drink contained no sugar at all shook Mia to her core.

She took a gulp and let out a deep sigh. Then, she began to analyze its flavor...or rather, she *didn’t*. Mia would never stoop so low as to focus her efforts on foodstuffs during such an emergency. Thus, after acquiring the much-needed calories, Mia began to burn them with her mental efforts.

Oh, that’s right. I heard wolves have excellent noses. Maybe...

Mia spoke up in a whisper. “Perhaps we could ask Aima for her help?”

Ludwig seemed to have caught on. “Indeed, Lady Aima is the younger sister of the Fire Clan’s chief. She may know their whereabouts.”

Now it was *Mia’s* turn to catch on. What Ludwig had said was, in fact...not what she was thinking at all! Well, strictly speaking, it’s not that she hadn’t thought the same. It’s just that all memories of such had fallen beyond the event horizon of her memories.

“The Fire Clan is also indebted to us. It’s possible they will offer their aid, but...just how Lady Aima will react is uncertain,” Ludwig scowled.

Efforts to welcome the Fire Clan back into the Equestrian Kingdom were luckily going smoothly. Currently, Elder Louhua was in a Meeting of Chieftains, acting in place of her clan’s chief. The Fire Clan did indeed have a great debt to repay to Mia, so it was doubtful they would refuse. But...asking Aima for her brother’s whereabouts would prove a double-edged sword—it would mean making use of their debt to demand she sell out her brother. Would she be able to ask such without offending her? Imagining it was enough to get Mia in a panic. Of course, Mia had no such intentions, but...

“Huh? Oh, no... I wasn’t...” Mia had not been expecting this development, and she rushed to deny Ludwig’s words, but...

“This may be our only option.”

“Yes, you’re right...”

After hearing Ludwig declare it as their only path ahead, she majestically retracted that assertion. If that was what Ludwig believed, it

must be the truth.

“I am glad you understand. Well then, let us hurry and talk with Miss Aima.”

Chapter 22: Educated by a Certain Someone

“Princess Mia, what is it you require of me?”

Aima had answered their summons, and she appeared slightly nervous as she looked at all those who were present. There was Mia, Anne, Ludwig, and...Dion Alaia. That would explain her panic. Dion was grinning, but Aima spared not so much as a glance in his direction, instead stiffly and awkwardly approaching Mia.

Thus, Mia had succeeded in naturally luring her over to the table...where she silently offered Aima a cookie. Much like latecomers to a party have to chug, latecomers to Mia’s gatherings had to devour. It was the underpinning of Mia’s guest-entertaining methods. The reason? Because no one could become belligerent after being offered a cookie...at least in the world of Mia’s head.

Once Mia had won her guest over, she spoke. “Truthfully, there’s something I must ask of you,” she offered suddenly. “To be frank, we would like you to tell us the whereabouts of the High Priestess and your brother.”

Aima scowled. “What do you mean to insinuate?”

Mia took her time with her words. “You are aware that Citrina has gone missing, correct?”

“Yes, certainly.” Aima nodded with crossed arms. “The Fire Clan also intends to summon our allies to aid in the search, since we are so beholden to you.”

“Well, we believe the one who kidnapped Citrina is most likely the High Priestess of the Serpents.”

Aima’s shoulders shook. For a moment, Mia was ready to hear Aima angrily shout, “I will not allow this ridicule of my brother!” But luckily, Aima remained calm.

“I see...so you resolved to ask me of their whereabouts.” She closed her eyes, clearly deep in thought. Then, she drew in a huge breath...and sighed.

“Princess Mia...you did well to ask this of me.”

Deep emotion permeated her voice. Mia was a bit confused by her reaction, but she decided to just be relieved that Aima had not been offended. At least, that’s what she *wanted* to do, but...

“I have made a decision. From this day forward, I will renounce my brother.”

“...Huh?”

This sudden declaration had caught Mia completely off guard.

Renounce her brother? Just what is she...?

Mia’s puzzlement was all over her face. “No, um... I wasn’t asking...”

“You and my brother are incompatible. If it is necessary I take the side of just one, I choose my friend, Princess Mia.”

It was absolutely unclear who had imparted such a teaching on Aima, but it was still quite the weighty proclamation. The aftermath of it left Mia dizzy. She was indeed after trustworthy friends. Connections that would offer you a helping hand in a pinch were incredibly precious, and thus Mia should have been grateful for any ally, but...this assertion was just *heavy*.

I don’t really think I have anything to offer that would equal a blood relation...

Mia groaned with a scowl. “By the way, Aima, what about your parents, or any other family besides your brother?”

“All I have are Keilai and Hasuki.”

“Keilai’s... Oh! Your horse. And Hasuki is...”

“The name of my warrior wolf.”

“I see...”

In other words, her brother was all she had!

Th-This is her only family member she’s talking about! This is too much for me!

Just what had happened to the Aima who was all “If we share a cookie, we’re friends!”? Why had she made such a heavy decision? Mia earnestly wracked her brain for the answers. Then, she changed her approach. She put on the softest and most tender of smiles.

“I...can’t take this. That sort of proclamation isn’t something that can be said so lightly.”

“Yes, however...”

“I am sure your brother is important to you. Thus, you shouldn’t give up

on him so easily." She was stern, not allowing for any rebuttal. "So casually renouncing your relationship... It's not something to do so lightly. Of course, Rina is important to me, and I want to save her no matter what it takes." She squeezed her fist. "I want your help. However, I don't want to see your relationship with your brother end either. It may be selfish of me, but could you listen to my request?"

What Mia was looking for was...moderation. To take things one step at a time. For now, all they required was information. It was still uncertain that Citrina had been kidnapped anyway.

"I see... I understand. I will take your words to heart. I will avoid being rash," she responded with a faithful nod. "I take incredible pride in the friendship forged between us."

For some reason, Aima sounded incredibly moved.

Thus, discussions on their rescue plan began. But right then, there was a knock on the door. A member of the Princess Guard entered. He had been keeping watch from outside.

“Apologies, Your Highness. This was just delivered to us...”

Ludwig had left to deal with the intrusion, and his face immediately grew grim. He rushed back to Mia, a small box enclosed in his hand.

“Your Highness, look...”

“Hm? My, what is it?” Mia tilted her head, but as soon as she saw what was inside, the color drained from her face. “I’m sorry, but could you summon Bel?”

When Bel finally arrived, Mia silently handed over the box’s contents. As soon as it caught her eye, she let out a pained scream.

“This is Rina’s!”

What lay in Bel’s hand was something she had crafted herself. It had been a present, a treasure that Citrina would never let go of—a troya.

Chapter 23: A Decision without Guidance

Having received this letter from the Chaos Serpents, Mia rushed to gather her comrades. This included Anne, Ludwig, Dion, and Bel. There was also Rafina, Abel, and his vassal Grammateus, as well as Aima and Malong. Once their core members had gathered, Ludwig began to speak. He had been entrusted with this task by Mia.

“We have received a threat from the Chaos Serpents. Their demand itself is not much cause for surprise. It simply states that if we value Lady Citrina’s life, then we should pay them a visit.” Ludwig folded his arms in thought. “However, what concerns me is that they have not demanded Her Highness make the journey alone.”

Rafina furrowed her brow. “That is quite strange... Usually such threats require a single person to come alone, without protection.”

“They most likely believed it would not make for much of a threat. Lady Citrina is an Etoiline of the Four Dukes, but when compared to Her Highness, it is clear which comes out on top. I am sure Her Highness would gladly give her life for Lady Citrina’s, but as servants to the princess, it is also clear we would never allow for such.”

“I see. So if they indeed intend to summon Mia, they would need to summon her guards as well. But even if they haven’t written so in their letter, I’m sure they would have a problem if we brought a thousand troops with us, wouldn’t they?”

Ludwig nodded. “They are probably hoping we reach that conclusion ourselves, considering they currently hold sole power over Citrina’s life. We may bring as many guards as common sense allows, but exceeding that would result in her death. And since it is the Serpents who will be judging that scope, I believe it will be best not to push things. It goes without saying, but the death of Lady Citrina would be a deep blow to all of us.”

When it came to Mia and Citrina, one was clearly above the other.

However, that comparison was only of relative value. Should the loss of Citrina create a fissure in their relations with the Yellowmoons, that would only prove favorable to the Serpents.

"But would Lord Dion fall under the scope of common sense protection?" There was a jocular undertone to Abel's question, but Aima shook her head with an earnest scowl. Wordlessly, Aima affirmed the opposite.

Ludwig's lips took on a bitter smile. "It is true that Sir Dion's prowess with a sword out-scopes common sense. However, under these circumstances, I believe our enemies are predicting his presence. To put it another way, the Serpents wish to lure Her Highness to their abode even should it mean calling Sir Dion there too. I assume they believe themselves to have an effective way of countering him."

Dion himself nodded. "I'm with Ludwig. They've probably got a perfect handle on how we're gonna respond. Not that I think we oughta go with everything they're plotting." He turned a mischievous smile toward Mia. "In fact, as a devoted vassal to the little princess, I'm against putting her in any danger. I think I'll be able to take care of things better alone anyway."

"Take care of...*things*...?"

Mia took a moment to translate Dion's choice of words. Then...she went pale.

"Let us be absolutely certain. Dion, you are sure you'll be able to save Citrina should you go in alone?" asked Mia.

"...Well, I should be able to take care of that too. I'll play it by ear."

Dion muddled his words, and suddenly, Mia understood what he meant.

He's saying that if Citrina ends up dead and it hurts our relationship with the Yellowmoons, he'll take care of them *too!*

Truthfully, that was not a future Mia wanted to see come to fruition. The High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents was Abel's elder sister. Should an assault by Dion get her killed, Mia wouldn't be able to face Abel again. But above all else, Citrina was Bel's dear friend, and even in Mia's book, she was a friend that could be relied on. Losing her would leave a sour taste in Mia's mouth.

I don't think I can just leave this all to Dion.

But there was another thought nipping at her mind. The grave danger of the situation was certain. Their enemies had almost assuredly formulated

their plans with the premise that Dion would be accompanying them, just as Ludwig and Dion predicted. Now, it was uncertain just how they planned to handle Dion Alaia, the Empire's Finest, but...

Oh, but they had the wolves... The wolfmaster. Or rather, Aima's older brother. This really is quite dangerous.

Thus, it wasn't that she didn't want to go. She *really* didn't want to go. Mia groaned with a scowl.

"Mia, what do you want to do?" She was interrupted by a sudden kind voice.

"Huh...?"

Mia was taken aback, but Abel just continued to speak to her with the same calming smile. "You should do what *you* want to do. I'll support you with everything I have. Should you wish for it, I would even go save Lady Citrina myself."

"Your Highness...I cannot allow..." Grammateus spoke up before he could even think.

Abel shrugged. "Earlier, I chose Mia—not my sister. I am not afraid to put my life on the line."

Those words were as noble as his sword arm. He would simply look ahead and step forward... That was the resolve embedded in his words.

"My, Abel..."

Mia felt as if his words had taken her hand—that all would be fine should she just close her eyes and yield to his lead. It might have been pure love...or it might have just been Mia's natural predilection to be a yes-man. Either way. But there was another voice who added their weight to the already-tipped scales.

"Well said, Abel Remno. I share your sentiments." It was Ka Aima, and she firmly thumped her fist to her chest. "Even should it mean harm to my brother, I am resolved to repay my debt to Princess Mia."

As had become typical, Aima made another weighty proclamation. But then there was *another* voice not ready to let Aima outdo her!

"Of course, I would also...um...be ready to sacrifice anything for my friend! For example...um...even my life!" Rafina put her inner sense of rivalry on full display.

Mia's smile stiffened. "Um...Actually, Miss Rafina...I was hoping you would stay behind to bring matters with the Equestrian Kingdom to a

close...”

Presently, Rafina had been attending the Meeting of Chieftains as a witness to the resolution that would be reached with the Fire Clan. They couldn’t just remove her from the proceedings.

“Not to mention that capturing the two of us together would be a perfect turn of events for the Serpents. It would be unfair for us to leave everything on Sion’s shoulders.”

Mia somehow managed to admonish her. Getting Rafina involved would only lead to more mayhem.

“However...I am incredibly grateful for your feelings, Abel, Aima, Rafina. I have now made my resolve.”

The options available to Mia had always been limited. Should she abandon Citrina, her enemies would only proliferate the news to every corner of the continent. The disastrous predicament that would leave her in was as clear as day. Thus...

“It seems that I will need to make the visit myself. Ludwig, I will leave the preparations with you.”

Thus, their course had been decided. Mia would take Ludwig and Dion —her elite men—to face off with the High Priestess.

However, something was nipping at her mind. After Citrina had disappeared, Mia had once checked the *Princess Chronicles*. However, these events lacked mention. Of course, the involvement of Abel’s sister was not something suitable for public records, and thus that wasn’t exactly strange, but...

Having lost her guide, Mia was left with a vague sense of worry.

Chapter 24: Offense and Defense

At the Chaos Serpents' dwellings, the High Priestess Valentina had led Citrina to the baths after concluding their discussions. Considering they were in an abandoned castle, this made for a bit of a surprise.

"Well, I suppose it is within the High Priestess's power to have this prepared..."

Having found a suitable answer, Citrina disrobed and sank one foot into the water. Truthfully, she was averse to the idea of taking a lonesome bath in enemy territory, however...

"Well, they already had many opportunities to kill me if they wished."

She took the offensive.

The face of her dear friend Bel was all that was in her mind, along with that of Mia Luna Tearmoon, the Great Sage of the Empire. There was a similar air about them. Citrina was sure that no matter what the situation, either would happily take a dip should a bath be something on the table.

I have heard that Princess Mia even bathed when she had been captured during the revolution in Remno...

The surface of the floor was much rougher than that of Saint-Noel, causing pain to her frail bare feet.

"These stones seem to be the same as those that build the castle wall. Does that mean this bath has always been here...?"

From what she had seen on her journey here, the castle was uncouth, clearly built for war. So just why was there a bath here? Those doubts were promptly melted away by the thick steam coming from the water. Citrina was certain that the water would have been heated elsewhere before being taken to the baths, but it seemed that it was instead sourced from a natural hot spring.

"So rather than building this out of necessity, they built it out of convenience...but just where would there be access to natural water like this? I was told we were near the Kingdom of Remno, but..."

Citrina drew a map in her head as she examined the baths. The room

wasn't quite as big as the one in Saint-Noel, but it could easily fit four or five people with room to spare. The bath itself was also quite spacious, overflowing with warm water.

Three bottles were placed next to the spout for washing. All were labeled, revealing them to be...high-quality products! Citrina took the shampoo in her hand and squeezed out a hefty dollop.

Now, this was not because she had just been insulted by the High Priestess. She had no interest in getting revenge on the woman who had called her smelly by proving her cleanliness. She was not so narrow-minded as to waste the whole bottle's contents out of petty revenge. Instead, she simply wanted to...examine things.

"Yep, this really is of fine quality."

Citrina stared at her palm, carefully observing the substance. It was quite viscous, but also gave off the pleasant aroma of flowers. She took some on the tip of her fingers, spreading it on her arm. It both spread and bubbled quite nicely. From this, Citrina concluded that it had been made from the finest of oils.

"So, she must have connections to royals... If she really is a Remno princess, then perhaps it's the royals of Remno? Or perhaps it's merchants she has connections with. Regardless, they may also be members of the Chaos Serpents..."

Citrina had heard a merchant clad in Equestri dress had been the one to approach Prince Echard in Sunkland.

"The man who kidnapped Rina would match that description, but...hm..."

Still lost in her thoughts, Citrina began to carefully wash her hair. After taking the time to fully enjoy the shampoo's soft bubbles, she rinsed it off to only once again carefully and meticulously reapply.

...This, of course, was *also* not because Valentina had said she reeked of sweat. Citrina had paid no mind to this comment at all. Instead, she just...wanted to keep her body as neat and tidy as possible to avoid being caught off guard like that once again. She did not at all believe that Bel would start to hate her. Really, she didn't.

Thus, Citrina lathered herself in a hefty portion of soap, rinsed off, and headed for the tub. The water was perfectly translucent. She tested the temperature with the tip of her finger before scooping some water to her

nose to check its scent.

"We don't seem to be near a volcano..."

Even Citrina could not make exact judgments on a substance's composition just through smell and taste alone if no distinct elements were present. She gave up on analyzing her location and submerged herself in the tub. It was spacious enough that she could stretch her body out as much as she wanted, and she did so with a groan before heaving a deep sigh. Then, she began to massage her legs—first her calves, then her thighs, and then her feet. Having been tied up during the journey had left her body stiff. Thus, she needed to loosen her limbs now while she could to make sure she was ready to deal with anything.

Of course, she would not escape alone. Citrina was well aware that her constitution was that of the average young noblewoman. Still, she did not let that mean she would be any less prepared.

"I'm sure Bel or Her Highness will come to save me..."

After massaging her whole body, Citrina rubbed her hands over her stomach.

"I suppose it's been about two and a half days... No, probably three."

Citrina had refrained from eating for a reason. Of course, one of them was because she wanted to protect herself from any possible poisonings. But more importantly, she wanted to use her hunger to keep track of the time—to avoid the intervals of when her captors would give her food from throwing off her internal clock.

Her stomach let out a miserable cry as she shook her head. "Hearing a comment about that noise from the High Priestess may be enough to shake me again..."

Having her growling stomach shamed as improper would likely leave her discomposed. The High Priestess could look into people's hearts, manipulating them through shaking their wills. Weakness of any proportion was not something that could be shown to her.

"But I'm sure this wouldn't shake Bel or Her Highness at all."

Were Mia in her place, she would probably just demand some food. Citrina couldn't help but envy her courage.

"It's probably because my heart's grown weaker that I'm talking aloud so much..."

Citrina splashed some water in her face to pull herself together. Then,

after taking a good soak, she sat herself on the edge of the bath to cool down before once again diving back in.

Of course, this was all an act of defiance toward the High Priestess. Citrina took her small revenge by taking as long as possible in the bath, keeping Valentina waiting. Calling a young woman smelly was not an act to take lightly, after all.

When Citrina had returned to the changing room, she found that the clothes she had been wearing earlier were nowhere to be found, causing her to panic. However, a more careful look revealed a brand-new dress had been prepared.

"If only they would stop with the surprises..."

Preparing a new change of clothes for a guest fresh out of the bath was a natural step for a host to take. However, the moment of panic it had caused left Citrina feeling as if she were wrapped around Valentina's finger, making her vexed. The dress was a tad oversized, and thus probably belonged to the High Priestess herself. Citrina was not exactly fond of the idea of wearing it, but in the end, she decided it would be better than her nightclothes. Having finished changing, she left the room to find someone waiting to greet her...and choked on her breath.

"It's been a while, Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon."

It was her mortal enemy, the wolfmaster.

Led by the wolfmaster, Citrina once again found herself visiting the High Priestess. Valentina gave a gracious smile at the sight of her.

"I hope the bath was to your liking. You did take quite a while."

"Yes, it was incredibly pleasant. I was able to wash off the sweat from my long journey." Citrina lifted up the corners of her skirt and gave an affected curtsy.

"Hee hee! That dress fits you nicely. Here, sit." Valentina invited her over to the table, which was decorated with steaming cups and tea cakes. "I just finished brewing the tea, so let's drink it before it gets cold."

Citrina followed her suggestion, taking a seat. However, she didn't want to lose control of the situation, so she sought to assault Valentina with a preemptive attack. "Before the tea, could I ask you a question, High Priestess?"

"No need to be so formal. Call me Valentina, Rina."

Her overly friendly tone caused Citrina's heart to twinge.

"Please call me Citrina. Rina is a name reserved for those I am close with."

She had only been called by her nickname, and yet, it had managed to shake her. She couldn't help but be annoyed with herself.

"Hee! In that case, I *will* call you Rina. After all, we're close, aren't we? You *did* belong to the Serpents at one point, making us old comrades."

Citrina knew well that Valentina would try to worm her way into her heart. Still, each word from the High Priestess was an assault on her conscience. Citrina couldn't let Valentina keep control of the conversation. So she ignored the assault, instead going on an offensive of her own.

"Could I ask you a question?"

"Of course. I promised as much. What is it?"

Valentina's smile remained cool. Faced with it...Citrina took a brazen step forward!

"What do we need to do to destroy the Chaos Serpents?"

The question had clearly shocked her. "My! Hee hee! That's quite the kicker."

"You said I could ask anything." Citrina sipped her tea with a blank face.

Valentina shook her head. "Unfortunately, I can't answer that. Oh, I'm not trying to be mean! I simply don't know the answer to that myself."

"You don't? Even while being the High Priestess?"

Citrina gave her a provoking stare. Still, Valentina only responded with a smile.

"Yes. The title of 'High Priestess' is only that—a title." She shrugged. "Just what is the 'High Priestess'? Our sacred text, *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*, has no such answer. It asks not to make a priestess, nor for her to command her followers. So my theory is this: the High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents is a temporary right to authority created by the Chief of the Fire Clan to maintain his power."

"A temporary right to authority...?"

"Well, it was quite a good idea. The High Priestess served as a mother to many shamans."

With that, Valentina took a happy chomp on the cookies before her.

Chapter 25: Touched by a Granddaughter's Growth

After everyone had left to make their preparations, Bel and Mia were all who were left in the room. Bel had been silent throughout the whole meeting, instead lost deep in her thoughts. Her expression was clouded.

"I'm worried about Rina," said Mia.

Bel nodded wordlessly.

"Don't worry, Bel! We'll definitely save your friend."

With that, Bel opened her mouth as if to speak, but then...she closed it. After a deep sigh, she began to speak. "Miss Mia, there's something I've been thinking about."

"Oh? What is it?"

"I was thinking that I could act in your place."

"Hm?"

"Instead of you, I could go. Look! If I cut my hair, people who don't know us well would easily think I was you."

"I see..."

So she'd be my body double... Mia began to nod, but caught herself. "Wouldn't that be pointless?" She quickly shook her head. *I mean, if I did that... Rina would kill me.* A shiver ran down Mia's back as she imagined being pursued by a murderous Citrina.

For instance, if Bel were like Dion, so strong that the Serpents would be unable to land a single blow on her, having Bel act as Mia's double would have its uses. Conversely, if Mia had been that strong, she could take control of a separate unit, or use the power of a thousand men to save Citrina by herself. It was a far cry from reality, but it would justify Bel's plan. Under current circumstances, however, there would be no use. It would only temporarily assure Mia's safety. But even in that case, should Mia manage to survive, it would obviously only leave her in a quagmire.

"That reminds me, Bel. Don't you think too little of yourself? If you

weren't here, Rina, Lynsha, everyone—and I, of course—would be terribly sad. I don't want you forgetting that."

Bel gave a vigorous nod. "Yes, I know. But I also think this... If it were for a friend, or someone else important to you, it's okay to put your life on the line." Bel gave a complicated smile. "I know you're the Great Sage of the Empire, but it seems like there's stuff that even escapes you, Miss Mia! I love this world. There's Mother Anne, and Mother Elise, and Mr. Ludwig, and General Dion, and Grandpa Abel, and...there's Rina. I'm surrounded by so many kind people. This world is so warm...and you built it, Miss Mia. I love it here." This time, her smile was wide as can be. "That's why I want to stay here forever. I don't want this dream to end...but, I don't want to extend my life if it means doing something unfair. I'm a descendant of the Great Sage of the Empire after all!"

Her determination filled her gaze. It absolutely blew Mia away.

"I will never do something to hurt your honor, grandmother. I want to live with pride so I can continue to be by your side. I'm always thinking of the best way to do that."

"I see..."

Mia found Bel's declaration a tad overwhelming. She stared at Bel, incredibly moved.

As it was, Bel had certainly moved beyond trying to pay her thanks with coins. She had graduated from living her life so that she could disappear at any moment. Mia was certain that now, Bel had finally decided to live proudly *here*...in *this* world. It had Mia's heart swelling with joy.

"Now that I think of it, it's been quite a while since you first came here, hasn't it?" Mia muttered, recalling the day they had just met.

"That's right... It has..."

A glittering future was described in that peculiar book she had come across that day in the library, and Mia had denied it. She had denied the future where Abel was driven from his country, striving for a future that was even brighter.

"Hmph... Had I just accepted that future, I probably would have had an easier time..."

What had immediately followed that was Bel. Ultimately, Mia gained even more allies, as well as rapport with Esmeralda and the other Etoilers. She also now was facing off against Abel's sister, and maybe, she would

have to involve herself in other matters of Abel's family.

"It's been tough, but things have definitely moved in the direction I've wished for them. In that sense, maybe *you* were my true guide."

"Huh? What do you mean, Miss Mia?"

"Oho ho! Don't worry, Bel. Things will work themselves out. Grandmother Mia is on the case! Whether it be Rina or the Serpents, I'll stick to my promise. I won't let your dream end," said Mia with an encouraging smile.

The next day, Mia and the others—the Citrina Rescue Squad—departed from the Southern Capital.

Chapter 26: Princess Mia Waves the Baton of Interjection

Led by Ka Aima, the crew headed for their enemies' base. On their way, they stopped at the hidden village of the Fire Clan; according to Aima, their foes were located to the village's south, in a dense forest that stood on the border between Remno and Belluga. Thus, the village of the Fire Clan was a perfect resting point, completely on their way. The real reason they stopped, though, was due to a proposition made by Ludwig.

"If possible, we should gain the support of the Fire Clan."

Mia wordlessly nodded in agreement. To her, anything said by Ludwig was absolute fact. She would not doubt it for even a moment. She knew where her real work lay—consoling Bel who worried about Citrina would assuredly insist they spare not a single minute stopping anywhere on the way, and putting a stop to any members of the Princess Guard who would grow belligerent for the same reason. All she had to do was to compose herself and state thus: "Ludwig is absolutely right. I believe in his every word." She was an erudite yes-man—always aware of where her yeses needed sending.

The villagers greeted them with affable smiles the moment they stepped inside. They had already been made aware of the favorable developments in the discussions with the Equestrian Kingdom, and aid from the Forest Clan had already arrived. Thus, they had been released from their worries, now in a small moment of respite.

"I'm glad things seem to be going so well here." Mia's smile softened as she looked at the villagers from inside her carriage.

But that was interrupted by a request from Ludwig. "Could I be granted a moment of your time to discuss our next course of action, Your Highness?"

"Yes, of course. It's best we come up with a plan as soon as possible."

Knowing what came next would bring Mia some comfort as well. Thus, she was all for his suggestion.

Currently, they had not fully worked out a strategy on how to rescue Citrina. For the time being, they had simply resolved to follow the demands of their enemies. At least, that's what Mia had thought.

"Let's have Lady Aima and the other women of the Fire Clan use the news of reconciliation with the Fire Clan to call their warriors back home," offered Ludwig, quietly. He took a moment to adjust his glasses. "As was our original goal, we would be able to weaken our enemy's forces. I believe this to be our best course of action."

"Hmph..."

Mia groaned...and then cast a glance to Dion, who was sitting beside Ludwig. Thankfully, Mia's common sense was telling her that with these two men present, she should refrain from any interruptions.

I can't say anything that'll make me look dumb. I'll just have to listen to them for now.

Mia was completely aware of her own limitations. Wordlessly and silently, she gave a nod, as if profound ideas were filling her head. Ludwig nodded back.

"I am sure you are aware, but the High Priestess should not have a way to defend against this."

"I see. As enemies of the High Priestess, we're enemies of the Fire Clan's warriors. But the women here won't think the same way, huh?"

Ludwig nodded at Dion's question. "Even the High Priestess will not be able to demand that the Fire Clan warriors kill their own women. And, should the women inform them of their reconciliation with the Equestrian Kingdom, the warriors will simply have to listen."

If they could separate the High Priestess from these warriors, the troops under her command would be paltry in number.

"We have known for long that there are not many soldiers under the Serpents' flag. Rather, I believe that to be one of their strengths."

Ludwig's thinking was simple. The way of the Serpents was to attack order through nefarious plot. It was rare that they were in direct command of troops, and the ones that were currently under the High Priestess's command were simply due to a mutual interest. Still, the warriors themselves were simply following orders from their chief, and it was thus

doubtful that they felt any strong sense of allegiance with the High Priestess herself.

"According to Lady Aima, all those who have taken to the Serpents' doctrine have left the village to spread their gospel to the world...thus, it is likely that the Serpent who approached Prince Echard in Sunkland was one of the Fire Clan."

Serpent shamans preach their philosophy. *This* is what those who take to the Serpents' doctrine become, and therefore, they stand separate from the High Priestess's guards. Such devotion was not to be used to protect their leader, but instead spread their teachings.

"Hm... Hmmmm..."

Mia nodded along to Ludwig, using her "hm"s to try to get more words out of him. She made sure to put her hand to her chin, insinuating to all that her mind was full of genius ponderings. You see, slight reactions from their interlocutors were imperative in getting someone talking comfortably, and Mia offered one of the highest pedigree.

"In any case, I believe it would prove advantageous to cut off all who would not listen blindly to the High Priestess's every demand. We should limit our enemies."

After hearing his opinion, Mia remained silent and looked toward Dion.

"I have to agree. But I can't say I'm a big fan of basically making hostages of the Fire Clan's women."

"Hm..."

Mia let out a perfectly apt "hm" before once again glancing at Ludwig, asking "what do you make of that?" with the angle of her brow.

"It is true that this is akin to taking hostages, but...I believe that should not prove a problem," he asserted.

Mia gave another nod. "In that case, let us ask the Fire Clan for their support. We should have Aima summon them."

Whatever Ludwig says is what they would do. Mia's trust for her loyal subjects was just that deep.

Thus, once the Fire Clan had been gathered together, Ludwig explained the situation...and made a request.

"I would like all of you to ask those of your clan to return home."

Aima went to reply, but another woman from the village beat her to the

punch. “Of course we will do so. It will bring our men away from the High Priestess and back to us.”

Not a single woman was in opposition. From the onset, they had asked the crew to return their men to them. Under these circumstances, it was outrageous to think they would decline in offering their cooperation. It did not matter that they were being used as hostages, or that they were being *used* at all. Instead, a beautiful relationship of mutual interest had been reached.

I see. The best form of profit is not when all the profit is yours to gain, but when both sides get to make their own profits. The stupid four-eyes must have worked hard to get that lined up.

In the final days of the Tearmoon Empire, Ludwig had racked his brain for any way of acquiring provisions, as it had already become difficult for Tearmoon to offer any benefits to their benefactors. In the end, he had to rely on empty promises, and there were few who took those propositions seriously.

Right now, our interests align. That’s why they so readily agreed to help us out.

The women here had probably already made attempts to bring their men back home. Yet none had come to fruition, as the circumstances the clan faced meant they had nothing to offer. But now, circumstances had changed. The clan once again walked the same path as the Equestrian Kingdom, making coming home an attractive option. Perhaps there were some who had reservations, but the task of persuading them could be left to the Fire Clan.

“Hmph... I believe this means we will be able to greatly limit our enemy’s forces, won’t we?”

“Yes, Your Highness. I had wondered what you were planning when you suggested a Matching of Steeds, but I should have known, since it came from you. We’ll be able to avoid a large-scale military conflict.”

His praise was honest, but Mia still had some apprehensions.

“I hope splitting their army will go smoothly, but... No, even that might leave me uneasy.”

It was the High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents they were dealing with, and thus they needed to continue cautiously. That thought in her mind...Mia took one of the cookies that lay in front of her and tossed it in her mouth.

Chapter 27: Just What *Are* the Chaos Serpents?

A tea party between Valentina and Citrina was held the next day as well. Previously, Valentina had complete control of its proceedings, but in an upstart, Citrina today went on the offensive.

"If you do not know how to destroy the Serpents, there's something else I'd like to know. Just what *are* they?"

She stared up at Valentina and sipped her tea...the taste of poison was noticeably absent. Though, Citrina had been fairly certain that they would not use such means after all this time.

"My, how is knowing going to help you?" replied Valentina with a smile.

Citrina responded with a victorious grin of her own. "That's obvious. It will let me figure out a way to destroy them on my own. As long as I know what they truly are, they will be possible to defend against."

The look in Valentina's eyes was reminiscent of how one deals with a troubled child. "Just like the poisons you're so knowledgeable of, yes? You know enough to even kill your dear friends."

"Enough to protect them, yes."

Valentina seemed a bit taken aback. "My, I see you've gotten over that wound. Hee hee! Well, so be it. I'll teach you if you wish." She took a sip of tea to recompose herself. "But you know, your father is already well aware of the answer."

"Huh...?"

Citrina's face was one of pure shock and confusion. It brought a wide smile to Valentina's lips.

"Duke Lorenz Etoile Yellowmoon knows exactly what we Chaos Serpents are."

"Huh? You're lying! Father never knew..." Citrina darted her eyes about the room in panic.

“Oh? So he never told you?” Valentina’s words were teasing. She laughed derisively before flip-flopping into a kind smile. “Hee hee! How adorable. I see you’re quite the daddy’s girl.”

“Wha—?! I’m not...”

Citrina could feel her cheeks grow warmer. Having once again been toyed with, she bit her lip. She had hoped to take control of proceedings today, but it was once again the High Priestess who dominated. It was frustrating, and Citrina looked to the floor despondent. But the voice that addressed her was shockingly tender.

“It’s nothing to be so embarrassed about. I think it’s a wonderful thing. In fact, I’m incredibly jealous.”

The warmth that could be gleaned from her voice only further troubled Citrina—her tone was completely genuine, as if she really *did* envy her.

“You’re jealous? You’re just saying what’s convenient...”

“My, I was serious. What you have is something I don’t. I don’t think it’s strange for me to be jealous at all.” She shrugged with a self-deprecating grin. “You see, I was almost killed by my father, or at least, someone close to him.”

“Huh?” That sudden confession had Citrina bewildered.

Valentina shook her head. “Well, enough about me. Let’s return to our original topic of discussion. I am certain that Lord Lorenz Etoile Yellowmoon knows exactly what the Serpents are, and I do not say that to tease or deceive you. At the very least, Barbara thought as much.” She laughed. “Don’t look so hateful! She did treat you quite poorly, but she had her own circumstances. She had enough reason to hate the nobility... At least if I tell you that, I know what you’ll think. ‘Miss High Priestess is just trying to fluster me! If I knew that the Serpents had enough of a reason to become one, I’d feel bad for them, and then my heart would waver...’”

Even had such thoughts not been in Citrina’s head, now that she was forced to acknowledge it, she would forever remember. Citrina was certain that these discussions were so that the High Priestess could take command of her heart, and yet, she couldn’t help but listen.

“Well anyways, I don’t find it strange at all that Lord Lorenz would have figured out what we Chaos Serpents truly are.” She gave a suggestive cackle before growing quiet. “The Weakest House of Yellowmoon was *built* on the foundations of Chaos Serpent logic.”

“Wh-What does that mean?”

Valentina ignored her husky croak. “So then why didn’t Lord Lorenz tell you or Mia Luna Tearmoon? The answer is simple—knowing would have just left you with despair. You say you want to destroy us, but Lord Lorenz was well aware that was impossible.”

Citrina did not look at Valentina as she shared her elegant soliloquy. Instead, her eyes were trained on the tea before her. It was so delicious it angered her, and after enjoying that taste to the fullest, she remembered something important—no matter when, Mia always had the composure to enjoy some tea and cakes, all with the expression of one who was not thinking at all. That carefree countenance gave Citrina the strength to once again face Valentina.

“Even if my father had reached that conclusion, he might still have been mistaken. Thus, I want to hear the answer from you already. If you really do plan on telling Rina, that is.” Citrina forced an exasperated expression. “But after all this, I’m thinking you don’t.”

“The Chaos Serpents are and are not heretics. They are and are not an abandoned clan, and they are and are not a noble family fallen from grace. They also are and are not a princess forced from her country...”

She closed her eyes as if reciting a long-practiced poem. Then once again, she spoke.

“But just what does that make them? What are they *truly*?”

She made a teasingly grand show of sipping her teacup. Her lips now soaked with the fragrant herb tea, she whispered her final words.

“You see, the Serpents are an infectious thought, spread between members of a certain group. They’re a *meme*.”

Chapter 28: *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*

"A meme?" Citrina tilted her head in question.

Valentina was deliberately slow with her reply. "Yes. The Serpents are an infection that spreads between the weak and the defeated, warping their conscience. It corrupts the morals of the frail, rewriting what they take to be common sense and transforming them into beings intent on destroying order."

Her tone was not colored with joy. Instead, she was perfectly equanimous, as objective as a scholar.

"Once the Serpents attach to a weakling host, they begin to mutter in their ear. 'We should just destroy those rules. They abused you. Stepped all over you. What is there to stop you?'"

It was precisely the voice of a Serpent that now reverberated in the air, beautiful as a song and seductive as a lover's whisper.

"'Ignore the rules written by the winners. Turn aside from people who live comfortably by trampling life's losers.' They seduce them just like that." She snickered gleefully before continuing. "Whether it be the poor, the weak, or the defeated, under normal circumstances, they are all fettered by morality. Even those with nothing to their name would never wish that the parents and child walking hand in hand through the village would sink to the bottom of despair. They *couldn't* wish for it. The same goes for merchants and nobles. People have a conscience, but the Serpents—they destroy it."

Her pretty hand was closed into a tight fist. Her fingers were long and delicate, befitting of a princess. But on that princess's hand, Citrina saw the illusion of fresh blood.

"And so, we offer a weapon." Valentina paused, taking a moment to stroke the slithering serpent adorning her gospel. "*The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth* is full of methodology. It speaks of how to destroy

countries, to kill nobility, and to control others. It is an amalgamation of the various wisdoms held by those whose hearts were warped by Serpents, an embodiment of evil itself."

Citrina's own family came to mind—the House of Yellowmoon, the weakest of the Four Dukes built on the foundation of Serpent logic. A continuously perfected mastery of poisons was passed down through each generation. That might *also* have been something that was meant to be recorded in that book.

"B-But...your logic makes no sense," Citrina managed to say. "The weak overthrowing the strong should destroy the Serpents itself. I mean, once they win their battle, the weak will want to write a new ruling order as the victors. After destroying the order that worked badly for them, they'll create a new order that favors them and work to maintain it."

That would only amount to destroying old order and creating new order. The Chaos Serpents' logic of trying to destroy *all* order wouldn't hold. Valentina responded to Citrina with a kind nod. Then, she placed two berry-topped cookies on the plate before her.

"For example, hm... Let's say that I, a weakling, commanded a revolutionary army to wipe out Remno's monarchy. This one with the red berry is me, and the one with the blue berry is the monarchy." Valentina moved the cookie with the red berry. "Let's say that as a new ruler, I created a new government. But that would still leave some who are weak, no?"

She pointed to the cookie with the blue berry with one of her long fingers.

"The survivors of the monarchy. The Serpents spread from one disenfranchised to another, jumping between hearts. Thus, those survivors would now become Serpents."

She tossed the cookie with the blue berry into her mouth. She munched on it as if she were savoring every bite before licking the crumbs from her lips.

"But what about this scenario? Let's say we executed all the losers. What would happen then?"

She split the cookie with the red berry in half.

"The weak would still exist. Even among the revolutionary army, there is a hierarchy. There are those who were spurned. Losers would be born from the power struggle, and the Serpents would slither their way into *their*

ears.”

After tossing that cookie into her mouth as well, Valentina put her head between her hands and stared at Citrina.

“A parasitic thought that infects through the human flaws that create the weak and strong, winners and losers...*that* is the true form of the Chaos Serpents. Thus, we’ll never die out. You’ll never destroy us, and we’ll never disappear, as long as humanity lives on, continuing to create winners and losers.”

There was strength to her words, capable of stopping any voices of dissent. They were the words of an oracle.

“Lord Lorenz knew exactly that. He knew it would be near impossible to wipe us out, and thus he gave up. Serpent shamans are people. Thus, you can execute them or burn them away. But once a thought has entered someone’s mind, there is nothing you can do to erase it.”

She gently closed her eyes. Her tone was now the solemn voice of a prayer.

“Had our heresy been that of human sacrifices or self-harm, our teachings would have died out, right? That’s pure brutalism. It hurts. No one would want to do that. Such teachings are easily cast away and lost to history. But the Serpents are *kind*. We give a gentle push to the dissatisfied weak, just like a close friend. We offer them a weapon to cheer them on. Such a teaching would never die out, so long as the strong continue to abuse the weak, dividing us between winners and losers.”

Then, she took *it* in her hands—a thick and worn book, its cover adorned with a slithering snake.

“That is how we gave name to our holy book.”

Her voice was pure. She was a priestess delivering the divine voice of an oracle.

“Those who crawl the earth. Those *who are weak* and are forced to crawl the earth. This book is for them.”

“Ah...”

Citrina swore that in that moment, she could see the serpent on the book’s cover give a coquettish squirm.

Chapter 29: Ludwig's Troubles

On the following day, those of the Fire Clan were the first to leave the village. They had surprisingly decided to all depart together—not a single man, woman, or child was left behind.

"The precious men of our clan are with the High Priestess. Of course we would all go and bring them back as one," affirmed Aima as she waved Mia farewell. "I have deep gratitude for the kindness you have shown us. I will not let you down, Princess Mia."

Following Aima's words, all the women gave a strong nod. It was a heartening sight, but as she saw the Fire Clan off, Mia couldn't help but mutter her apprehension under her breath.

"I do hope all goes well..."

"Don't worry, milady! I am sure Aima will pull through," encouraged Anne. Her tone was jovial, but she couldn't hide the worry on her face.

The sight of the two left Ludwig with a thought: *I am sure that what worries Her Highness and what worries Lady Anne are not the same.*

Ludwig had gathered that Mia worried not about the Fire Clan's ability to convince their men to step down, but of the negotiations that came after...though just how he had "gathered" that remained unknown.

Hm... I am sure Lady Anne wishes to accompany us. In which case, I best bring her to the same page.

Ludwig had already figured out that Anne was without a doubt one of the pillars of Mia's mental well-being. This incident would require Mia to not only support the captured Citrina, but also Abel, who now stood as an enemy to his elder sister. The burden on her shoulders was a great one. Thus, she needed support—leaving Anne behind was *not* an option. It might prove perilous, but Ludwig had determined it to be necessary.

Ludwig gave a dramatic nod. "This is only conjecture, however... I believe that the chances of their success is quite high. I also believe it is possible the High Priestess will do nothing to interfere."

"Huh? Is that so?" Anne blinked, clearly shocked.

“Hmph...” chimed Mia. She was imperturbable, responding with only a single mutter. The interjection was of the highest grade, dripping with the grand refinement of a ruler. Then, she gave a glance at Ludwig which was instead dripping with the sentiment “just explain it for me please!” However, her request seemed to reach Ludwig, as he began to do just that with a nod.

“As I have said previously, I do not believe that the Fire Clan warriors are devoted to the High Priestess. Instead, I believe many will readily return should they be called to.”

Even if that number were few, it would still reduce the High Priestess’s forces. Additionally, if their foe’s goal was simply to lure Mia to their base, it was likely that they would choose to limit their numbers themselves. At least, that was what Ludwig had surmised—it was the converse of their enemy’s choice not to enforce a limit on the guards Mia could bring. They sought to lure her no matter the protection that could be accompanying her. Thus, they would want to avoid creating a situation where Mia would choose to retreat after seeing their troops were too great in number.

All of this meant that Mia and crew had the option of refusing to come by citing the number of enemy guards as their reason. It might anger the High Priestess and result in injury to Citrina...but should that occur, Ludwig was prepared to offer his life as compensation. Right now, the foundation of Ludwig’s thought process was doing everything it could to avoid the folly that would be losing the Great Sage.

“Of course, even should there be warriors devoted to the High Priestess, having them all gamble their lives in defending their hideaway would not be the most effective use of them. That being said, it would also be difficult for them to take Her Highness’s life in an ambush. Lord Dion’s presence would render such impossible.”

An assassination attempt while the wolfmaster kept Dion busy was a possibility, but it would be a fool’s job to plan around such uncertain circumstances. Earlier, Ludwig had asked Aima if there were any bowmen within the Serpents of particular skill, and she had stated that there were none who were capable of evading Mia’s guards well enough to land a finishing blow. However, that would prove different should they be in possession of one with the arm of a Lulu.

“Thus, the best move for our enemy to take would be inculcating a

Serpent into the group of Fire Clan warriors. This would prove unfavorable for us. However, it's important to remember that our mission here is simply saving Lady Citrina, and thus limiting any unknown factors that could hinder that goal."

Ludwig glanced at Mia, who responded with...

"Hmph!"

...A perfectly majestic "hmph!"

"There may be those among the Fire Clan who have already turned to the Serpents. Our plan may lead to us welcoming them back in—and should that happen, it may mean begetting more of their machinations."

In fact, to Ludwig, such a strategy seemed even more fitting of the Chaos Serpents. Hand-to-hand combat and assassinations on the battlefield did not really scream Chaos Serpent-style.

After articulating what would be the worst possible action the Serpents could take, Ludwig reached his conclusion. "Still, those who have turned would be powerless in affecting our rescue mission. The real troubles come later. Thus, we can also save dealing with them for later. To put my argument succinctly, our mission is simply to limit the forces that will be waiting for us at the Serpents' base."

The sole aim of their plan was decreasing the military might that the High Priestess could use to greet them. Thus, it was imperative that the rescue of Citrina and the defection of the Fire Clan warriors be concurrent.

"You're right," Dion said with a nod. "Well, Elder Louhua's on her way, so I'm fine with her being in charge of sniffing out which of her clansmen are drunk on the High Priestess. It's not something we should be involved with anyway. That's a problem for the Fire Clan." Dion shrugged. "No need for long-term thinking right now. What's important are the castle ruins that are about to become a battleground. All's good if we can get the Fire Clan men to retreat, and if any stood in the way of that, that'd be enough to make some guesses about our enemy's goals as well. If there aren't enough who come back home, that just means they're out there waiting to ambush us. If we can estimate how many of their forces are hiding out there, that'll make for some useful info itself."

Dion's thought process was simple—the current battle was all that was set in his sights. Thus, the only thing worth thinking about now was how that battle could possibly go down. Right now, weaker enemy forces would

prove an advantage when rescuing Citrina, regardless of the issues it could possibly cause later down the line.

Ludwig made sure to check that Mia nodded before giving his reply. "This is simply my opinion, and I believe Her Highness might have gotten hints of the same as well. However...I believe the High Priestess is likely capable of discussion."

Now it was Anne's turn to interject. "What do you mean?"

"To use a different phrase, I believe her to be someone we can reach a mutual understanding with. Our enemies wish to summon Her Highness to their hiding place. Thus, I believe she will cooperate in eliminating anything that would hinder that goal."

If summoning Mia was her main goal, then the warriors of the Fire Clan would actually prove a detriment—any unforeseen skirmish between Mia's group and the Fire Clan would only have Mia on the fast track to escaping.

"There are merits to be had in forcing the Fire Clan away from her dwelling, and merits to be had in leaving them in her command. But when weighing these against one another, I at least believe that the High Priestess will assuredly choose to relinquish her army."

And it didn't really matter if that wasn't the case either. Deciding to bolster their base's defenses would only create that much work for them, and in that case, winning over the Fire Clan's men would be an effective countermeasure. It would leave their enemy shaken.

I was worried about what was to come after Her Highness suddenly declared her participation in the Matching of Steeds. However, I see that even a temporary reconciliation between the Fire Clan and the Equestrian Kingdom has served as a blow to the Chaos Serpents as well.

Once again, Ludwig was absolutely astonished. It was doubtful that Citrina's abduction had been included in her calculations, but Mia's maneuverings nonetheless proved a great nuisance to the High Priestess.

"Should our enemy respond with a sense of understanding, the true issue lies in what their *true* aim is."

Should the High Priestess be so intent on seeing Mia that she was willing to let go of those guarding the castle—and thus most of her forces—she must have a goal that would be worthy of that sacrifice. But that was still a complete mystery.

"There must be a point in going through all this just to call the little

princess over. I bet they have quite the plan up their sleeves."

Dion was exactly right. And of course, that also had to be what was weighing on Mia's mind as well.

"In any case, let us make sure the protection around Her Highness is absolutely solid."

The enemy's plans still unknown, all Ludwig could do was ensure Mia with the flawless protection flexible in responding to any change in circumstance. Not only were they limited in how many of the Princess Guard they could bring, their side was lacking in troops in the first place. The Princess Guard were skilled, but they did not have the means to infiltrate a castle. Only one seemed capable of such a feat—Dion—but his absence beside Mia would only beget their enemy's vigilance. Grammateus of Remno would be another possibility, but he made no assurances when they asked for his assistance in rescuing Citrina. Thus, they had no option but to surround Mia with a few unparalleled swordsmen as her protection.

Thus, theirs was a strategy of attrition. They would fortify their forces and wait for the enemy to exhaust all their options. Then, they would slip into the gap it created and complete their rescue mission. The enemy having taken hostages, Mia's side was somewhat beholden to their enemies' wishes. But once they bit a hole in those defenses, they would strike.

With a hostage, the Chaos Serpents have complete control of the initiative. I am far from a genius, but I believe it will require all our efforts to chip away at their forces. All that leaves is putting Her Highness's survival as our highest priority.

The very best outcome would be rescuing Citrina unscathed. But should that fail to happen, they had to ensure that they could make the argument to Duke Yellowmoon that they hadn't abandoned her. To Ludwig, that was the most likely future outcome, but he also knew that to Mia, saving Citrina was the bare minimum. The only problem was making that expectation the reality...

Not knowing a path to that future, Ludwig racked his brain over and over.

Chapter 30: Don’t Let Your Guard Down! (Except Mia Kinda Does)

“My, I’m quite famished...”

The sky had already begun to grow dark by the time she had finished her afternoon talks with Ludwig. Mia had returned to the house of the Fire Clan’s chief, which they were currently borrowing as their lodgings. Aima lived there alone, but it was still quite bigger than the other cottages in the village.

Mia believed it was probably Aima’s aestheticism that led to the lack of trinkets around the room, but in any case, it was imbued with a vague sense of absence, even more so now that Bel and Anne had stepped out for a bath.

“This place is quite lonely, and I imagine that would be even more so if she had at first been living here with her brother...” Mia sighed. “Ka Maku, the wolfmaster. I hope we can convince him to come home, but hm... If he won’t listen to Aima, just how are we going to convince him?”

Should they succeed in bringing the wolfmaster and his warriors back to the village, all that would be left was the High Priestess, Valentina. Even if she were to have a few guards, there wouldn’t be anything to worry about. As Mia prayed for this possibility, she looked about the room and suddenly laid eyes...on a wolf-fur mantle, hung proudly on the wall!

“Hm...could this be the coat of the parent or other ancestor of Aima’s wolves?”

Such fur was hard to come by, and Mia couldn’t help but run her hand through its fluffiness.

“My, this is...!”

The superb texture had Mia groaning in delight. The fluffiness embraced her hand, and it just felt so...*good*.

It might have been a moot point by now, but Mia was the princess of a mighty empire, as hard as that might have been to believe. Thus, while Mia strove to practice temperance, she was overwhelmingly surrounded with

items of the highest quality—which often happened to be items that were soft and fluffy. Thus, while she was used to fleecy blankets and velvety carpets, she still had quite a fondness for fluff.

"Hmph..." Mia looked around at her surroundings. "This might be one of Aima's family treasures, so maybe she doesn't want me touching it? But she hasn't warned me not to. If I just wrap it around me a *little*, it shouldn't be a problem, should it?" she muttered, her hand already reaching for the mantle.

"Oho ho! This makes for quite the excellent coat. It's also kind of fun! It's like I'm a wolf..."

Mia was already half on the floor, imagining how great it would be to use for a nap when...

Knock knock.

Someone came to the door.

"My, Anne got back quickly."

Mia was feeling a bit mischievous, and thus decided to shock her with her getup. She carelessly reached for the door, only to find out...she had gravely let her guard down. On the other side was her Princess Guard, as well as their leader, the Empire's Finest, Dion Alaia, and the true brains of the Great Sage of the Empire, Ludwig Hewitt. But it was the person standing outside the doorway that had Mia's mind exhausted from all the reeling it was doing. Mia had assumed there was no danger, and in a way, she had been right. But in another, she had been fatally wrong.

"Hey, Mia. Sorry to disturb...you..."

It was Abel, absolutely taken off guard by the sight of the mischievously grinning Mia, who was wrapped in the furry wolf's coat.

"Um..."

"O-Oh! Abel! Wh-What brings you here so late?!"

His unexpected visit left Mia's voice in a screech. She took a moment to check her appearance and realized how embarrassing she looked, what with how absolutely delighted she was by the fur she wore. This was not a view for the public eye.

"Are you cold?"

"N-No! I was just suddenly overwhelmed by— I mean, um, right! I was just thinking that this might help us escape the wolves' noses. I wasn't thinking about anything silly, like how comfy it would be to sleep wrapped

up in this thing...”

“I see...” He gave a troubled smile. “Oh, but it does get quite cold here at night, so this is good. Could I invite you out for a moment, Mia?”

“H-Huh...?”

“There’s something I want to talk with you about.”

“Yes... I wouldn’t mind at all, but is something wrong?”

Abel met the confused tilt of Mia’s head with a playful grin.

“It’s nothing too important, it’s just that...the moon looks so beautiful tonight. I wanted to watch it with you.”

“Oh? You did?”

Wait, was this a *date*? The realization had the last of Mia’s guards crashing to the ground.

“Oho! A moonlight walk sounds wonderful! Absolutely amazing!”

“Well, sadly there’ll be guards with us, so I won’t be able to flirt with you,” joked Abel with a shrug.

“Hm...”

Mia crossed her arms in thought.

Chapter 31: The First Joint Effort

"In that case... Oh, right!" Mia clapped her hands together. "Why don't we watch the moon from the rooftop?"

What flitted through her mind was a brilliant scene reflected on the dungeon's gray walls: *The Poor Prince and the Golden Dragon*. During his journey, the prince had stopped at a crude hut, and he sat upon its roof and watched the night sky blanketed in stars.

I thought that scene was just wonderful. I always wanted to try it myself!

Now, she saw the scene for what it most likely was—a dream of Elise's. Bedridden and jealous of her younger siblings who could climb atop the roof to watch the stars, she put her wish to do the same within her story. Then, that dream was passed onto Mia, locked in a dungeon and away from the sky.

Oho! I definitely need to make use of this opportunity!

Mia gave a satisfied nod and addressed Abel. "What do you say?"

Abel was blank-faced as he listened to her until he suddenly erupted in laughter. "Ha ha! The rooftop, huh? I didn't know you had such a naughty side to you."

Thus, the two climbed onto the roof. Luckily, the second-floor window made for an easy entrance, but...Mia's reaction betrayed that.

"Oh, this is high. I'm...a bit afraid."

Carefully, *cautiously*, Mia started to make her way across the rooftop, the boards creaking with her every step. Abel took her hand in his and escorted her to their destination.

"You seem quite used to this, Abel."

"Yeah. When I was a kid, my brother and I climbed up on the stable's roof. We got quite the scolding."

"Your brother? Oh..."

Gain's twisted grin flashed in her mind.

"I guess that's surprising. When I was little, he wasn't as moody as he is now. We would even play together sometimes."

“I see...”

It *was* surprising. But at the same time, perhaps that was only natural for young kids. Having no siblings of her own, Mia was unsure.

There must have been something that caused him to grow so twisted. I almost feel bad for him...

While Mia was lost in her thoughts, Abel suddenly stopped and plopped himself on the ground. “You were right. You really can see the stars from here.”

“I’m glad...” she mumbled, growing a little nervous as she lay down beside him. But then...“Whoa...” A gasp escaped her lips.

A curtain of stars—twinkling as if arranged by the Holy Deity's wisdom—filled her entire gaze. The scene was so beautiful it made her chest feel as if it was about to explode.

Yes, this is it... This is exactly what I envisioned when I read Elise's book...

The prince and the dragon sat side by side and looked to the stars above. In the depths of the dungeon, Mia had imagined that scene, and now, it was right before her eyes.

"Abel, I'm so glad you invited me out here." Those words escaped Mia's mouth in a whisper.

"Ha ha! I'm glad you like it so much. I try not to be stingy around the girl I like."

He wore a full-faced smile. Mia looked at him before once again returning her eyes to the night sky.

"The stars really are beautiful," she said. "The moon too... I see it's full tonight."

As Mia absentmindedly stared into the night sky, she suddenly heard a whisper.

"Aren't you...scared?"

"Huh..."

She looked toward him. Finding their faces so close together, Mia drew in a nervous breath.

"We're going to see the High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents tomorrow, and yet, you seem so calm..."

"O-Oh, well. Hm..."

Mia averted her gaze and began to think. Truthfully, what she was feeling right now didn't quite amount to fear. With her indefatigable sword and brains by her side, she was confident that they would be able to overcome any trap their enemies might have set for them.

And Anne is with me too. I have everything I need to meet Abel's elder sister! The one thing I'm worried about, though, is Rina...

Was Citrina suffering? That was Mia's only qualm.

Well, Rina does seem quite tough. I'm sure she'll be fine as long as there's value in having her as a hostage...

Mia now observed Abel. *Hm, it seems Abel may be a bit nervous, however...*

That was quite understandable. After Remno and the Yellowmoon manor, this was now the third time Mia and her friends were heading to a lair of the Serpents. But before, they had Sion, Keithwood, Tiona, and Liora with them.

Abel places a lot of trust in Sion, and they're quite close. No wonder he's feeling nervous. They were totally in sync when they fought the wolfmaster that one time...

Right now, Mia had her long trusted vassals with her: Ludwig, Anne, and Dion, all from Tearmoon. There was also Abel and his attendant Grammateus.

That would make this a combined force of Remno and Tearmoon, but...hm...

Mia suddenly hit upon an incredibly momentous realization, which was...

If we consider my Tearmoon retainers my arm, and Abel's Remno attendant his arm, then...that makes this the first official Remno-Tearmoon collaboration!

...something completely unimportant! The useless lovey-dovey imaginings that often accompany young love.

Oho ho! In that case, we absolutely must succeed! We'll rescue Rina and make sure everyone has a happy ending. We also need to bring Miss Valentina home... I won't let our first collaboration end in despair!

Mia pumped her fist in determination, looking in the air at nothing in particular.

"Mia...?"

"Hm?"

Abel was giving her an anxious look. "So, you really are nervous about tomorrow too... No, maybe I'm mistaken." Abel cut himself off and stared into Mia's eyes. After a moment, his lips twisted into a bitter grin. "You were thinking of something completely unrelated, weren't you?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. I'm surprised you noticed." Mia gave an anxious nod.

Abel, instead, gave a gleeful grin. "Pft! I'm glad I was right. It seems like I'm starting to understand you better these days." His face grew serious. "There's something I need to tell you." He sat up and looked straight into her eyes.

"Huh?" Mia's mouth was hanging straight open.

Abel softly began to speak. “Mia... I...”

The moonlight formed a halo around his face, tinting it red. He met her gaze, his eyes earnest, reflecting his heart as it mustered up all the courage he had.

Mia gasped. Abel spoke.

“Princess Mia, I...I love you. I promise I do, more so than anyone else in the whole world.”

His sudden confession had Mia’s mind boiling over.

“Th-Th-That was quite sudden! Abel, I-I mean Sion too... Are all noble men like this?”

Thoughts like “My, has my time come?! Have I hit the romantic jackpot?!” had her on cloud nine for a moment, but the look on Abel’s face had her returning to earth. He didn’t look...*happy*.

“I apologize if it felt sudden to you. I felt like I was running out of time. I fear that soon...I may lose the right to say it.” He averted his gaze.

“I-I don’t want this. You seem as if you’re about to go far away...”

“I’m not going anywhere. But I fear...it may become impossible for me to be your fiancé.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“It’s my sister...I asked Malong to send word back to Remno. I haven’t received a response yet, but my decision is to go with you. Still, that might upset my father. I worry he’ll take away my title as prince.”

“My! But that’s...”

She bit her words. After a fallout with his father, Abel was expelled from Remno...and to save him, Mia and her friends jumped into action. Such was a world written in history books that had been lost to the workings of time...

That’s when Mia realized that while Abel had shared her feelings...that’s where it stopped. He didn’t ask what she wanted to do with that information, nor did he propose, or ask that they become lovers instead of friends. He simply shared his love and ended it there. He believed that if he lost his title, marrying Mia was something he couldn’t hope for. Yet still, he wanted to share a future with her...

“Even if you do lose your title, that’s nothing you need to worry about! You’re you, aren’t you?”

His expression remained the same. “I know you’re not one to see people for what’s on the surface, that you pay no mind to ranks. But if my sister

did something awful to Lady Citrina, I wouldn't be able to face you again. How would I ever be able to express my love for you?"

"Abel..." she muttered. But then, after finally understanding what troubled him so, she smiled. "Abel...you're an idiot."

With the kindest of smiles, she said...*that*.

"You might say you've lost the right, but did you truly believe I would accept that?"

Mia was perfectly aware of a simple fact—she was the world's greatest follower of the Mia-first philosophy. Abel's opinions could never shake that.

"Even if you run away or go hide in Remno, I won't have it! I'll just go there myself and bring you back with me. The same goes for your sister too. If necessary, I'll drag her away from the Serpents by force!"

Mia had made her resolve. It wasn't just Citrina they were bringing back; Valentina would be with them too. This now set in her heart, Mia stood up and...made a discovery!

"Oho ho! I see."

"L-Lady Bel, you can't bother them!"

It was Bel, sitting cross-legged and raptly watching over the proceedings, along with Anne, who was desperately trying to pull her away.

“Bel! Just how long were you watching us?!”

“I saw you and Grandpa Abel heading toward the roof, so I decided to follow you!”

“So, you saw the whole thing... Well, I did at least suspect as much...”

Mia gave a defeated sigh. Bel, on the other hand, laughed.

“This is a date you’ll have to save! To think this is how my grandparents deepened their bond of love...” Bel seemed incredibly moved.

Abel butted in. “I’ve been wanting to ask for a while, but you call Mia ‘grandmother’ sometimes, right? Why is that? I’ve also heard you call me ‘grandpa’...”

“Hee hee! That’s a secret! But I’m sure you’ll find the answer one day!” She laughed with a mischievous grin.

Abel instead looked completely confused, which had Mia laughing herself.

“Yes, she’s right. I’m sure you’ll understand one day.”

“You too, huh?”

Abel’s look of slight displeasure had giggles once again erupting from Mia.

That night...was fun beyond all measure. Faced with the oncoming confrontation with the High Priestess, it should have been trepidation that filled the air. Instead, it was laughter.

That night left an indelible mark on Mia’s memory. Not only was it the first time Abel declared his love, it was also...

Chapter 32: Serpentine Malice

Today, too, Valentina held a tea party with Citrina.

“I’ve been meaning to ask if you know any martial arts. If I recall, the lady of house Redmoon has quite the sword arm.”

“No. Such heavy things are too much for Rina.”

“Hee hee! I bet you’ve never held anything heavier than a poisoned needle.”

Citrina was blunt in response to Valentina’s cheerful grin. “Even if I did practice martial arts, I doubt Rina could win against that strong guard over there.”

Citrina glanced over at the wolfmaster who was waiting behind Valentina.

“My, I wouldn’t be so sure. The Yellowmoons may be weak, but they learned poison to kill their enemies, didn’t they? Swordsmanship is the same.” She brought her teacup to her lips with a graceful smile. “My strength is no match for his, and yet, I could kill him if I wanted. See?”

Valentina took a fork lying on the table into her hand and began to poke her fingers.

“People are softer than steel. No matter how strong the person, a blade can cut through their skin, and if it’s the neck, or arm, or any other critical point on the body, you can kill them, even that Dion Alaia whom Princess Mia is so fond of. Of course, it requires strategy. If you know you’re too weak, you could avoid crossing blades, or put enough distance between you and your foe to make it hard for them to use their full force. But practice could teach any of that, which is why it’s foolish to say one person’s sword arm is better than another’s. And the whole thing could be over before that should you be able to land a fatal hit with a bow from afar.”

She snickered, as if she was abasing the practice of swordsmanship itself.

“Yes, I know you’re quite strong. Is that also why you sent all your guards back home?”

Citrina looked at the empty hallways. That morning, the women of the Fire Clan had come to call their men back home—a call most of them had heeded.

"It's true that this isn't ideal. Oh, but not for me. For Princess Mia. Her bait was so tempting it completely won them over. I'm impressed." She glanced at Ka Maku, the wolfmaster. "I bet even his authority as chieftain would not have been enough to stop them. Not that I think he would have given any orders, though. Isn't this what you wanted, Maku?"

His expression was steady as he turned back to Valentina. "I know not what you speak of..."

"Madly in love, the chief abandoned his clan to be beside his beloved. Now chiefless—and still furious at their chief's selfishness—it became easier for the clan to seek aid from the Equestrian Kingdom, while *also* ridding themselves of obligation toward their chief... The only problem is that Aima has inherited the skill of domesticating wolves. Well, I'm sure she'll overcome that. I bet you were even thinking it *might* be better for her to just be dragged away with the rest of her clan, no?"

The wolfmaster remained wordless as he stared back at Valentina. The bitter smile she gave him looked to Citrina to be one of deep affection, the type you might flash at a not-too-bright younger brother.

"Maku, you really are lousy."

"Am I?"

"Yup! No one would ever guess a man like you would be so madly in love. It's why most of your warriors came with you, after all. You should have at least made sure they saw you whispering sweet nothings in my ears. You really are awful at this..."

"I see." He nodded. "I thought you would have been the one against it, Valentina. Maintaining an armed force is not how the Serpents have operated thus far."

"Yes, you're right. Kunlou's sudden disappearance is much more in the style of a Serpent. Our strength comes from blending into the masses. But...I'm the High Priestess after all. I'm not exactly like other Serpents."

"I thought you said the High Priestess was a sham meant only to make the power of the Fire Clan's chief clear..." butted in Citrina.

Valentina nodded. "I'm surprised you remembered. What a bright girl you are, Rina."

Having been referred to so familiarly, Citrina couldn't help but scowl. Through their various tea parties, Valentina seemed to have completely grasped what made Citrina's skin crawl...or at least, that's what it seemed to Citrina.

"However, your thinking is a bit naive. Even if it's a sham, power is still power. Even an imitation looks real at first glance, no? My existence forces outsiders to think this: I need to defeat her! She's an enemy worth more than my life! I need to speak to her myself!"

"That's..."

...true. Mia and the others were convinced that as the nexus of the Serpents, Valentina was a grand foe in need of vanquishing.

"I've long been thinking of how to use my title as High Priestess...but to be honest, it's a nuisance, at least when it comes to hiding myself. Still, it's hard to abandon it. So just what am I to do? Right now, the person obstructing me the most is Princess Mia of the Tearmoon Empire, and thus I thought to use my name to lure her here."

"So you are going to stay here? Even without your guards?"

"You're mistaken if you believe I rely on the Fire Clan warriors. When I said that sending them off wasn't ideal, I was simply referring to the fact it meant revealing I had a scheme up my sleeves that didn't involve them."

Valentina finished her tea. She stood up and grabbed a new pot, pouring some of its contents into both Citrina's and her own cup.

"I wanted to rid myself of my guards to make it easier for Princess Mia to come here...it's true. It might have been nice to use them for show, but...Maku wouldn't be a fan of me abusing them too much." She giggled.

"Why...are you telling Rina all this?"

Citrina glared into Valentina's eyes. She had no clue what revealing her plans could accomplish for Valentina.

"Hm, I wonder... I'll tell you once we finish our tea. Make sure you drink it before it gets cold. I have it at the perfect temperature right now. It really is delicious."

Valentina's smile was perfectly pleasant. It made Citrina feel as if she was being toyed with, but still, she brought her cup to her lips.

"Huh...?"

The cup fell from her hands. The world before her became a blur. She had been careless. She wasn't expecting this. After so long, why was she

being poisoned *now*?

"Bel..."

Her body twisted from the chair, collapsing on the floor.

"I really am better with swords than poisons. Too little, and it takes a while to kick in."

"Are you sure about this? I thought you said you would use her alive..."

"Of course I mean to keep her that way, but it's up to Princess Mia to come in time. With the antidote, she'll wake up like it was nothing at all. But if they wait too long to give it to her, she'll stay in an eternal sleep until she quietly passes away. I've handed it over to them, but whether they come in time is now in God's hands."

"To think the High Priestess would speak of God..."

"I'm sure if they're too late, they'll curse his name. But I'm sure arriving in time will have them cursing him all the same. They'll turn their back to the divine, hating the world...in other words, they'll become *Serpents*." She lifted the corners of her mouth. "Hm... For now, let's get her changed. Oh! Let's put her in rags. We have the clothes we use for sacrifices, so let's put her in those. A proper performance is important. We have to make them think she went through something terrible."

An evil scheme was being formed right above her head, but Citrina could do nothing to stop it.

"Had it been the first few days after arrival, she would have been pale and thin. But now, she has eaten well for the past few days. The color has returned to her face. Do you not think it looks unconvincing?"

"Hee hee! You're right. I thought she'd be more delicate, but she really is a Yellowmoon. After she determined us to be little threat, she ate everything up with no hesitation and slept perfectly sound. She's got grit."

Citrina wanted to object to the offensive discussion happening right above her head, but she no longer could.

"Well, the poison should take away some of her color. It'll still make for a fine performance. Enough for *her* to run forward with no hesitations, at least."

Valentina's voice fell through the last cracks of her fading conscience.

"Of course, it's all only for show! We won't hurt you any more than we already have. After all, you..."

Citrina's consciousness dropped into darkness.

Chapter 33: The Ominous Mushroomless Forest

The next day, Mia and company left the village to follow after the previously departed Fire Clan. However, this didn't mean they left the forest. Instead, they continued ever farther into its depths, revealing the village to only be at the woods' outskirts.

Their surroundings were a dimly lit gray, the voluminous leaves in the trees above an obstacle to light. A veil of darkness cast over the undergrowth, the wet caliginous air sticking to their skin. Each step was accompanied by the snap or crackle of dead leaves, as if alerting their enemies to their locations. They all traversed the terrain with bated breath, making sure to step over the roots that had grown with the malicious intent to catch their feet.

Hmph, running away might not be as easy as I thought. I'm an expert when it comes to forests, but this is hard work. And I'm sure it would only be worse if I was also trying to escape my enemies...

Mia wiped the sweat from her forehead with a sigh.

"Are you all right, Mia?"

Abel was a step before her, but he treated her with worried kindness. When the terrain grew rough, he'd offer her a magnanimous hand. He really was a gentleman.

"Yes, thank you. I'm all right..."

Mia answered with an averted gaze. The events of the previous night had returned to her mind, overwhelming her with thoughts...saccharine! She was in full romance mode. She slapped her cheeks to recompose herself.

"I'm fine, Abel. Absolutely in no way out of the ordinary. There's nothing you need to worry yourself over."

It was true. Their journey was one of vigilance, filled with the fear that their enemy could strike at any moment, but Mia wasn't worried at all, for at the helm of their party was none other than the Empire's Finest. The only

drawback Mia could see was that the threat of flying arrows had resolved them to a trek on foot and not horseback.

Throughout the journey, she had assaulted Ludwig with a series of questions such as “How does one move through the forest and leave no trace?” You see, Mia was a positive thinker. She wasn’t going to miss this opportunity to greedily observe all of Ludwig’s emergency-related knowledge.

“I’m quite surprised there’s a castle so deep in these woods,” Mia muttered without thinking, impressed. No matter the size of the castle, Mia was certain that building one so far from civilization would have been a hefty task.

“We are far from the Pilgrimage Road, and one would never need to pass through here unless they meant to cut through the forest. It makes this an ideal spot to conceal oneself and prepare for battle,” offered Ludwig with a nudge of his glasses. Sweat had also started to form on his brow. He may yet be a young governmental official, but it seemed like physical labor was a bit beyond him. “We’re also near Belluga’s borders, so I’m sure it is hard for Remno to interfere in this land. In other words, this is a white space on the world map.”

Dion gave a sarcastic affirmation. “Could be some fortress made by some ambitious Remno King. You never know.”

“Well now, I have served the Remno monarchy for many decades and have never heard such a tale,” cut in the Mushroom Knight, Grammateus.

While a bit of a digression, their squad was as follows: Dion and Grammateus made up the front line, followed by two members of the Princess Guard. Behind them were Abel, Mia, Ludwig, Anne, and Bel. The rear was protected by an additional five members of the Princess Guard. Additionally, all soldiers of their retinue carried with them large shields capable of defending against an attack from any direction.

Those really are excellent shields. If they circled around each other and closed off the top, they could make a fortress! In which case, I should give them even bigger shields. But that may mean it’s best to get even bigger men to carry them... It’d be nice to get some soldiers from the Diamond Legion, but hm...

As these strategic thoughts whirled about Mia’s mind, the group continued deeper and deeper into the forest.

“Is this really the right way?” she asked, looking to what lay beyond Dion...only to discover that it was Aima’s wolf Hasuki who was leading him!

His tongue hung from his mouth in a pant, and when he looked back at Mia, he let out a woof to say, “Leave it to me!” She should have found it reassuring, but still...she couldn’t completely rid herself of her apprehension.

Hasuki should be a clever wolf, and yet...ever since I heard the name I’ve felt...hm...

This forest is the same. There’s something off.

She started to feel this trepidation as soon as she had left the village. But she couldn’t quite put her finger on *why*. At best, all she could say was that there was *something*...

“This forest really is quite creepy...”

That amorphous fear left Mia perplexed. It bothered her. There was something...*strange*...about this forest.

Driven by her fear, she looked around her surroundings. And finally, she found its source.

There was something in every forest that was *missing* here. And it wasn’t a lack of life. Rather...

“There’s no mushrooms in this forest!”

...crows cawed in the distance. A rabbit shook the underbrush, and the budding saplings waved their leaves. This forest was filled with life, and Mia’s lament reverberated through it.

Chapter 34: To the Serpents' Castle

A half day had passed in their journey into the Mushroomless Forest. Despite Mia's perpetual search, she found no edible mushrooms; her sixth sense informed her that all the mushroomesque fungi she did manage to find were poisonous. Of course, only the Holy Deity knew if she was right, but this whole matter is utterly inconsequential.

Still, Mia couldn't help but mutter, "This really is ominous..." and the like throughout their journey, putting all others in her retinue on edge. Once the word "ominous" had escaped the Great Sage's lips, it was impossible not to be nervous. Amid this unease, a castle suddenly appeared before them.

"My..."

Whatever strangeness was brought about by the lack of mushrooms, this was the exact opposite—the unease of finding something that *shouldn't* be there. The castle towered above them, as if it had simply pushed the thick trees out of its way. It was made of sturdy stone, and despite its dilapidated state, the bergfried still appeared to reach the heavens. The castle walls that surrounded it were quite tall and showed signs of recent repair.

"This is quite the castle. We'd have been in some trouble had we decided on a siege."

Grammateus looked to the castle's peak and gave a hearty laugh. "What excellent planning, Sir Ludwig. If you truly have succeeded in vacating the troops who guard this castle, your intellect could rival a whole army. How truly admirable."

"I appreciate the praise, but...this is all the result of Her Highness's preparations, only possible through the reconciliation of the Fire Clan and Equestrian Kingdom."

"Hah! Indeed. She is truly deserving of her epithet as the Great Sage. It was no rumor that she stopped the revolution in my country of Remno with a single utterance—I see that now."

Grammateus's genuine admiration brought a smile to Mia's lips. Being

praised by none other than the Mushroom Knight was quite pleasurable.

"This castle seems quite...tenacious," said Ludwig while adjusting his glasses, causing Mia to whisper his final word back.

There was truth to the word *tenacious*. For instance, there were the castle walls. Just where had each stone been quarried? How much distance was traversed and energy spent in its creation? With what in their hearts did its creators build it? All these questions led Mia to conclude that there was a strong sense of tenacity embedded in this castle...but at the same time, it led her to another thought.

This doesn't seem to have been built by the Serpents...

She was brought back to that far-off summer day. In the bellows of that deserted island stood a warped sanctuary similarly lost to time. Compared to its faint blue glow and blasphemous build, this castle seemed quite tame —there was a stark difference between it and the architecture so grotesque it looked inhuman. Instead, the castle before them seemed simply to be the result of tenacious efforts, and thus it was not animosity that the castle exuded, but the silent, lingering melancholy of the defeated.

Still, it doesn't quite feel like this castle was exactly built in good taste. It's definitely not a place I want to be in for long, but...I'm assuming Rina is here.

"Princess Mia! I see you have arrived safely!"

Hasuki, their guide, rushed forward at the sudden voice. He wagged his tail as he ran toward the castle gates where Aima stood. Having found Mia's crew, Aima jogged toward them.

"How did it go, Aima?"

"It went well thanks to you, Princess. Our warriors are currently on their way home with the others. Only the High Priestess...and my brother, Ka Maku, remain in the castle." Aima bit her lip. "I could not convince him. My words could not reach him, yet it is strange... My brother did not interfere. Thus, we were able to retrieve the rest of our men."

Ludwig nodded. "There are most likely to be other Serpents still within the castle, so we cannot be too relieved. However, this has undoubtedly greatly limited our enemy's options."

Aima nodded as well. "I heard from our men...that there are no Serpent soldiers inside. Before, there was Kunlou, faithful to the High Priestess. However, he has left."

“So the High Priestess and wolfmaster are the only ones here...” muttered Mia.

Aima took out a piece of paper. “I was requested to hand this to you.”

Mia looked the paper over and furrowed her brow. “‘Please bring suitable protection and make your way to the chapel.’ Hm...”

Dion stood next to her, letting out a dramatic sigh as he read it. “‘Suitable’? I mean, we always expected this, but I guess this is supposed to be a threat. Bring too many guards, and it’ll be the end for little miss Citrina.”

Ludwig sighed as well. “It appears bringing a small number of elite forces truly is our only option.”

“I’m going too!”

“This time, please let me be by milady’s side!”

Bel and Anne insisted that they be part of the group.

“Well...”

“I do not believe there is time to waver. My brother entrusted me with another message—Lady Citrina has been poisoned. Thus, we must make haste.”

With that, the infiltrating members were decided upon swiftly. Accompanied by Abel, Dion, Grammateus, Ludwig, Anne, Bel, Aima, and a single member of the Princess Guard, Mia set foot inside the castle.

Chapter 35: Discourteous Kinship

The castle gates which should have been closed shut were wide open. Led by Dion and Grammateus, the group stepped inside. Luckily, there were no flying arrows to greet them.

“There might be some traps lying about, so don’t put your hands on anything carelessly.”

Dion’s words prompted an obedient nod from Mia. While many had the unfavorable habit of being overwhelmed by the urge to touch exactly what they were told not to, Mia was not counted among their numbers. Instead, she timidly pulled her hands close to her body and meticulously watched her every step. Mia’s defenses were at their highest levels, constantly wondering if the floor below her would sink and set off a trap, or if the blade of a guillotine would suddenly fall from above her head. And of course...

“Bel, I believe you are already more than aware, but you can’t just go around and touch anything you want here. Understand?”

...she made sure to warn her curious-as-a-cat granddaughter. She was an example for grandmothers everywhere.

The palace and tower they saw earlier revealed itself as soon as they passed through the gates. To their right was a building that seemed to be the “chapel.” Emphasis should be placed on *seemed* here, as it was not holy symbols that hung from the eaves but the unsettling visage of a winged monster. The architecture also slightly differed from that of the Central Orthodox Church. At the entrance were two monstrous statues, sending them a menacing glare.

“Are these meant to represent the servants of the Archdaemon?” asked Mia. She was rather ignorant when it came to church teachings, but had Rafina been here, they would have surely been given a proper explanation.

“It appears so. That would mean that this castle was built by those who worship him,” Ludwig offered with a nod.

Dion looked back at the chapel. “Well then...why don’t we get to saving

our damsel in distress?" he muttered, turning to Grammateus. "So, which one of us is taking the helm?"

"Hah! I am grateful you would lend such consideration to an old soldier." Grammateus quietly pulled his sword from his waist and grasped it with both hands. "By your leave, I shall claim the honor of first spear. En garde!"

Flash! In an instant, the doors of the chapel were blown to pieces, gone without a single trace. The group made their way inside, cutting through the dust clouds in the air. The building was oblong in shape, and in front stood the crumbling statue of the Archdaemon overlooking the room. The statue was beyond disrepair, its uncared state affirming the fact that the Serpents were not among his worshippers.

There were other unsettling sculptures as well—countless in number, they enclosed the room from both sides, lit by the flickering light of torches. Their eyes all gathered at a point just before the room's center on what appeared to be a dining table. Atop it lay a single girl.

"My, that's..."

Bel strained her eyes, and the figure gradually came into focus. This was undoubtedly Citrina. She wore a single cloth, a hole cut in the top for her head. It was the clothing of a prisoner, and with her hands and arms spread eagle on the table and bound by thick ropes, she was the embodiment of pity.

"Rina!"

Bel's scream reverberated through the room. Citrina must have heard it and yet she did not so much as twitch. The color began to drain from Mia's face when...

"Uh...ngh..."

...Citrina let out a small groan as she squirmed on the table. The ropes limited her movements, but in any case, she was still alive. Mia breathed a sigh of relief.

"How terrible!" Citrina's woeful state had Bel covering her mouth in horror.

Mia largely shared her emotions, but then she realized something. With a cool head, she took a look at Citrina's face, and then...her forearms! *Hmph... The color of her face doesn't look too good from the poison, but her cheeks don't look sunken. No, actually...*

Mia had absolutely no reason whatsoever, but...she began to feel a sense of kinship with Citrina. A *discourteous* sense of kinship!

Citrina's father Lord Lorenz does have quite the hefty build, and being locked in a dungeon would definitely lead to a lack of exercise. Once everything is over, I'm going to invite her out for a long relaxing horse ride!

With that, Mia's mind was made up—they would definitely bring Citrina home safe and sound. That would first require treating her for poison, but it was all but certain that before they had that chance, their enemies would come to greet them. But just why had they called them all the way here? As soon as Mia began to ponder that question...

"Welcome, Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon. I am glad you are here."

...a voice reverberated through the hall. The odd acoustics of the room obscured its source, making it impossible to figure out where exactly it came from.

"Now, why don't you hurry and rescue the sleeping princess who was tragically poisoned?" the voice sang.

It was derisive, and yet to Mia, it sounded like a sinister song of praise to the Archdaemon.

Chapter 36: The Other Prince

For a moment, we turn back time to a corner of Remno's royal castle, Fedscoud. In the training grounds for royal men was Gain Remno, diligently swinging his sword. Surrounding him were training dummies made of bundles of thick branches, and he fell his targets one by one with a sword not made of wood but metal. To most onlookers, he looked to be unthinking in his movements, only relying on strength. But to those with a trained eye, it was clear that his slashes were deliberate and polished.

Recently, he had given up practicing against human opponents. The absence of his teacher Grammateus was a large part of the reason, but more importantly, he had realized going against opponents catering to a prince would only weaken his own arm.

"No number of defeated nobodies could ever mean anything."

Ever since he came to that realization, he spent his days swinging his sword alone. The phantom enemy before his eyes...was not his brother, Abel. Instead, his opponent was taller, thinner...

"Hah!"

He fought away his superfluous thoughts with a sideways slash. His final target now cut in two, he returned his blade to its scabbard with a dramatic sigh. He now realized that sweat had drenched his forehead, and he wiped it away with one of his sleeves as he stepped into the hallway. There, he found a young maid, still green to her work.

"Hey! You there. Bring me some water."

She shivered. "Y-Yes. Right away."

For a moment, she looked troubled. But then she quickly turned to where she had come from. Gain scowled. The maids of the castle feared him, and thus quickly obeyed his every word. And yet, this one had just shown a moment of hesitation. It was suspicious. Taking a closer look, Gain noticed she was taking immense care in handling a piece of folded parchment in her hands.

"Wait. What is that?"

“O-Oh. Um... This is for His Majesty...”

“Stop with the jokes. Like a nasty thing like that could be an official letter,” he sneered, glaring at the girl.

“E-Eek! It’s true. It’s just...that...”

“This is pointless. Hand it over.”

As soon as the words had escaped his lips, he took the parchment from her hands quicker than the maid had any hope of resisting.

“Ah!”

Rather, she closed herself off, shaking as if she believed he would hit her. She hobbled backward in retreat, but her feet fell out from under her, causing her to topple backward.

With a sigh, Gain grabbed her arm and stabled her.

“Gain, you can’t frighten girls like that!”

The scolding words of a woman reverberated through his head. She was treating him like a child, and his distaste for this fact had him cursing under his breath.

“What are you doing? I asked for water. I’ll bring this letter to my father myself.”

“Eek! B-But...”

“If you need to avoid any blame, just tell them I hit you and knocked you over. Then no one can complain.” With that, he turned his gaze to the paper before him. “Huh? From Grammateus... That’s right, he was abroad with Abel as his guard. A party in Sunkland, was it? How stupid.”

He snorted. But then he once again thought he heard a voice in his head.

“Do you look down on your opponents because you fear losing? Was being defeated by your brother really that bad?”

That teasing voice muffled by laughter left a bitter smile on his face.

“Damn, that is what she’d say, isn’t it...?”

For some reason, memories of his sister occurred to Gain even more frequently after he had lost to Abel.

“Listen, Gain, okay? If you want to act all big...not that I can really endorse that either, but...then you at least have to prove you’re strong. If you fail to do that but still act all pompous just because of your lineage, or the fact you’re the eldest son, or the fact you’re a man...then you’re just an embarrassment.”

His despicable older sister, always lecturing him on one thing or

another...was an opponent his sword could never beat.

“Don’t be cowardly with your swings. Attack from head-on!”

After he had said that, her reply had been...

“My, were you going to say that on the battlefield too? Do you think your opponents are going to fight fair too? The winner is the one who slays their opponent and survives. As king, that’s the kind of battlefield you’ll find yourself standing on.”

The sad smile she had worn was still burned into his eyes.

Evading his every strike, she would parry, releasing a forceful counterattack of her own. Her blade was beautiful, as if it was flowing through the air. Gain wanted to beat her from the bottom of his heart, and yet she never boasted about a win even once. But just like that...she was gone.

“Royalty cannot afford to die on the battlefield. You looked so full of yourself when you said that, and yet you died without even setting foot in one. Aren’t you the loser?”

His sister said she would change this country. But one day, she suddenly died.

“Damn. What a stupid thing to remember.”

With a shake of his head, he began to read the report Grammateus had sent.

He gasped. He had found a familiar name.

“Valentina...”

His sister, who would defy even her father, the king himself, to change their country, garnering the animosity of the major noble houses. She was dead, and yet...there was her name, written in the letter that spoke of her survival, as well as the nefarious deeds she was supporting.

“What are you doing, Valentina...?” he muttered. But then he surprised himself. His heart shook. If his sister, the one who always won against him, had turned to evil...he couldn’t forgive her.

“And just what am *I* doing...? Damn it...”

He ran to the stables, his sword still gripped in his hand.

Thus, all the actors had gathered, taking us once again to the stage of the Serpents’ castle.

Chapter 37: The Guiding Girl I —The Moon Shines Above the Imperial Capital —

In any case, we have to get to Rina. I need to make sure I'm careful and don't step on any traps. I'll take my next step before I put any weight on my first, just like walking on water...

With these thoughts running through her mind, a shadow suddenly appeared from overhead carrying within its hands a glinting dagger. As soon as it landed, it headed straight for Mia. A dazzling slash moved straight onto her dainty neck...and of course, Mia was none the wiser, completely unable to react!

The clang of metal reverberated through the room.

"Whoa, there... Thought I'd let you get her that easy?"

Dion's voice was unexpectedly close. Mia stood still in shock. She felt as if she could see the glint of metal dancing just outside her vision, and after concluding, "Oh, I was probably about to get my throat slashed just now," she made *sure* not to look over. Why? Because it was scary!

Though she trained her eyes elsewhere, the frightening sound of scraping blades was right in her ears. Just like ghosts, the belief that they were there was what makes them so chilling. But that was all in her head. If she just believed that they weren't there, they were invisible, and they were unheard, then there was nothing to be afraid of. The same could be said for an assassin's blade...well, not really.

"So, you are unperturbed," the wolfmaster uttered in awe. "You live up to your name as the Great Sage..."

Dion responded with a feral grin. "That's just the faith she has in her sword. Whoa!"

A gust blew by. Dion took another sword in hand, casually swinging it in the air. An arrow fell to the ground with a near silent crash.

“My, I was acting all pompous in my chat with Rina, but I may be losing face...” Valentina’s exasperated voice rang through the air. However, there were no additional arrows.

“Sir Grammateus, there should be wolves around. I ask that you and your prince watch out for our princess,” called out Dion after noticing Grammateus had drawn his sword to join the fray.

“Hah! Wolves, you say? How unexpected.”

“They’re not just any wolves; these ones are feisty. Stay on guard, Grammateus,” warned Abel as he pulled out his own blade.

“Well, looks like your surprise attack failed. Just what are you after, missy High Priestess?” taunted Dion, his blade still locked with that of the wolfmaster’s. The High Priestess remained calm, responding in the same singsong as always.

“Should you really be leaving poor Rina alone? If you don’t hurry, you might be too late. I even was nice enough to offer you the antidote.”

The antidote? What is she talking about...?

Valentina continued as Mia racked her brains. “You brought it of course, didn’t you? Rina’s precious little troya. Well then, I think it’s high time you went to save your ‘friend.’”

“Oh...”

The alarm bells immediately began to ring in Mia’s head. She turned around as fast as she could, but her view of Bel was now just her back as she rushed forward.

“Bel! Wait!”

She tried to stop her, but her pleas were lost.

Just you wait, Rina!

With that, Bel dashed forward, her quiet resolve hidden deep within her chest. She had not made her decision unthinkingly. In fact, Bel miraculously understood their situation better than anyone.

Their enemy’s phrasing beckoned just her.

Why was Citrina bound still?

She had been poisoned, so what use could it have?

In the presence of Dion Alaia, what use were arrows?

The answer to all those questions was one and the same: this was a trap —an exceedingly vicious Serpent ploy.

Should no one go to save Citrina, the poison would kill her. And yet, going to save her would mean death to her rescuer. But at the same time, that person had to be the one their enemy intended; if not, it would be Citrina who would die, shot to death with an arrow.

That was the trap—a test to see who would offer their life for Citrina's. Of course, the Serpents' number one target was clearly Mia. Thus, *her* being the one to save her would be what was best for their enemies. But Bel also knew that the High Priestess could make compromises. Her preemptive allowance of guards was proof as much. And in fact, their enemies made their compromises quite unsparingly.

Citrina's life was not worth Mia's. Thus, they made a concession. But that left the question of whose life *was* worth Citrina's—a question the Serpents had deigned to answer: the holder of the troya...Citrina's *friend*.

The High Priestess had made her call clear. "Well then, I think it's high time you went to save your *friend*."

With that, Bel was faced with a cruel decision: would she save her own life, or would she save her friend's?

Bel no longer was content with dying whenever. She would no longer give up so easily. In fact, she wouldn't give up at all! She wanted to cling to this world with everything she had, for she loved this world just as much as all that.

But still...she made her choice. She would save Citrina. In her small chest was an indelible thought. That far-off world—the world she had come from—was surely no longer. Mia's tireless efforts to avoid such tragedy had certainly changed the future. She felt that vaguely from deep inside.

But still...the words she had shared in that world were equally indelible, the fire of her memories ever burning. As the last descendant of the Great Sage of the Empire, her pride would be eternal, as well as her resolve to live a life deserving of that name. And choosing your life over that of a friend deep in suffering and about to pass on was not that.

"I'll save you, Rina."

She was not trivializing her own life; she simply felt that she wanted to protect Rina even should that be the cost. Thus, Bel rushed forward free of doubt or hesitation. Reaching where Citrina lay, Bel called out.

"Rina!"

Her cheeks were pale. She looked to be in pain. Bel forced those pallid

lips open, tearing into the stomach of the troya. It had been oddly firm, and inside was a small bottle. She took out the contents and had Citrina gulp them down.

“Uuu...ngh...”

She immediately furrowed her brow, contorting her face in pain. Then, she coughed before slightly opening her tear-filled eyes.

“Bel...?” she croaked.

“Rina! Thank goodness...” she sighed. But then came the sharp sound of wind.

That shrill sound did not miss its target...it landed right into Bel’s throat.

“Ah...”

Bel lost her balance. She wobbled, toppling right beside where Citrina lay. Then came the sound of a second arrow, meant to be the finishing blow. However, this one never made its way to Bel. Instead, it jutted out of Abel’s arm, as he had jumped in to block the arrow’s path.

“Agh...”

His balance had been put off-kilter, but he stood his ground. He glared at his sister.

“Valentina, how...? How could you do this?!” he screamed as if spitting blood. Before his gaze was...

“Well, that failed. So be it. We still ultimately succeeded.”

...Valentina, a bow held in her hand. That was when Grammateus cut in from the sidelines with a swing of his own sword.

“My, it’s been a while, master. I see your swordsmanship is as refined as always.”

Valentina threw her bow aside and drew her sword. With only a hair’s breadth to spare, she parried his slash. Still locked in battle with her old teacher, she left the chapel, the wolfmaster and Abel chasing after them.

The events that lay before her were dizzying. All Mia could do was watch.

“O-Oh! D-Dion! Follow them!”

Dion had approached her, but he responded with a face of steel. “I don’t mind, but do you want me to protect His Highness Prince Abel? Or do you want me to work with Sir Grammateus to cut down the High Priestess? The wolfmaster’s got a good arm on him, so he might prove to be trouble for the

old man.”

“...Make sure they all live.”

“Princess, y’know... Do you mean just Abel and Sir Grammateus? You may be including the wolfmaster in that, but there’s no way you mean that witch too, is there?” he asked, his face in an unpleasant scowl. “Aren’t you being too kind for your own—?”

“Please, Dion.” Her voice shook.

Taking a look at her face, he sighed. “Damn, can’t say I’m a fan of this, but...well, I guess there’s not too many opportunities to cross arms with the Sword Saint.”

With a shrug, Dion left the chapel. Truthfully, there were no grand or deep thoughts behind her words. She simply wanted time. She needed to collect her thoughts, and right now, she knew that thinking was beyond her.

“Bel...”

She tottered over to where her granddaughter, Miabel, lay collapsed, an arrow sticking out from her throat. The second arrow had missed. Yet a single glance could tell anyone that this was a wound that would prove fatal.

“B-Bel... No! No! I don’t want this...!”

Ludwig had released Citrina from her shackles, and she frantically dragged herself across the floor and over to her friend. She clung to her limp body as it dyed her hands red.

In fact, the whole world was dyed red, taking Mia back to a familiar scene from at a time yet unknown.

The red of a burning flame filled her vision. In the accursed chapel was a sacrificial altar, dyed red by a young girl's fresh blood. Collapsed on the dilapidated floor was the last princess of the Tearmoon Empire, Miabel Luna Tearmoon. And yet...she wore a tranquil smile. Happiness filled her heart. Surrounding her were the voices of those who had shown her affection and kindness. There was Mr. Ludwig, Mother Anne, her dear friend Rina, and Grandmother Mia, who she respected above all else. She wanted to be with them forever, listen to the warm voices that surrounded her forever. The final scene she met was that of a dream, and thus there was no more pain. There was no more fear. Suddenly, it no longer hurt to breathe. The world was now dyed gold.

"Bel...?" whispered Citrina, still in a daze. Her hand was sticky with blood, but suddenly, it glowed gold. That light passed from the blood to Bel's body, enveloping her in a dazzling light—one that looked familiar to Mia.

Isn't that what I saw when Bel first appeared here?

Silently, Mia watched the scene unfolding before her.

"I'm sorry, Rina. It seems like we have to part now," came Bel's voice. Just a moment earlier, she had been unable to speak. But now, those words reverberated clearly. It only made it all the more palpable that Bel's time had truly come.

"Bel...no! I don't want this! No...!" Her words muddled by her tears, Citrina clung to Bel. The drops were ceaseless, overflowing.

Bel gave an awkward smile, wiping the corners of Citrina's eyes with her fingers. "I'm sorry, Rina. I didn't get to keep so many of our promises. Um... As for my secret, you can ask Miss Mia! I'm sure she'll tell you. It's all right. I know we'll meet again someday...so really...it's okay..." After offering those comforting words, she turned to Mia. "Tell Lynsha thank you for me. And the same goes for Mother Elise! And your dad, Miss Mia...and Prince Sion, and Keithwood..."

"Bel..."

The light grew stronger. The extremities of Bel's body had been turned

into particles of light, and the infliction continued to spread. For some reason, to Mia, it looked like Bel was being smudged away...

Bel gave Mia a mischievous grin. “Grandmother Mia...don’t get too lazy! Make sure you give birth to my mom. And you have to get along with Grandfather Abel, okay? Out of your eight children, my mother was the...”

There was a sudden flash, and then...Bel disappeared into the air, leaving no traces behind, as if she had never been there in the first place. It was like the end of a dream—the *happiest* of dreams.

And all that was left was a single troya...

Deep in her sleep, Bel saw a vision.

Light flashed. What appeared before her was the rubble-buried ruins of the destroyed Tearmoon capital. Dark clouds of animus covered the sky, the whirl of a chain of revenge dying the sky black. It was the world of the Serpents—a world of destruction and chaos. The view left Bel with a single thought.

So that world really was a dream... There was no way such a kind world could exist. It was a dream the Holy Deity showed to me as a reward for never forgetting my pride...

Filled with resignation and despair, Bel closed her eyes. But then came a call from a nostalgic voice.

“I won’t let your dream end!”

It was the source of Bel’s close-kept pride. The voice of her respected—her *beloved*—Grandmother Mia, Great Sage of the Tearmoon Empire.

Light flashed once again. Now, Bel was faced with a new world. Impacts spread like ripples in the sky, the waves they formed washing away the black clouds of hate. Now rid of its blanket of animus, the moon was left dazzling in the sky. It cut through the darkness of night, announcing its presence with an encompassing glow that set the world ablaze in gold. The blaze burned away the ruins of the capital, becoming an aureate light that changed the shape of the world.

This, too, was like a dream—as if this cruel world was but a fantasy.

Light flashed again. A new view was revealed to Bel.

Chapter 38: The Guiding Girl II —What Mia Must Do—

"She left before saying what matters most..." muttered Mia, her voice shaking. "That means I'll have to have all eight... That really is quite the number."

She suddenly remembered one of her earlier deductions. Why had there been differences between Bel's memories and the *Princess Chronicle*s once history had changed? That was because words were more malleable than memories, and that also must be why the diary disappeared while Bel remained. Thus, there were things that were easy to reform, and things that were not. Life stood strong against time shifts. Thus, if Bel disappeared...

Mia silently closed her eyes. The happy-go-lucky smile of her granddaughter filled her vision. But then came the sound of clashing swords.

"Oh, that's right... There's something I need to do."

The loss of Bel only made that more imperative. Rubbing her eyes, she took to her feet. Oddly, she knew exactly what to do next; Bel had presented her with an answer, clear as if Bel herself was a guiding light. Mia feared that her enemies, like her, might slip into the past and gain a redo. Instead, that gave her hope, as there was a chance that Bel could gain that opportunity as well.

Bel is my granddaughter, after all! The wounds that killed us are even in the same spot. Given the strange way she disappeared, she may even go back again...

That left the issue of how far back she would go. Even a few days would be enough. Mia had enough faith in Bel's competence that she would surely be able to manage. But what if it was eight years that Bel slipped back in time, just as Mia had? Eight years ago, Bel was in the future.

It would be awful if she woke up in a war-torn Lunatear.

Valentina's death would lead to a souring in Mia and Abel's relationship,

which in turn could mean Bel would never be born, and even should she, it would still mean a different situation in the Tearmoon of the future. That wouldn't be good for the state of Mia's conscience at all. She wanted Bel to awaken in a Tearmoon greater than the one she had left, surrounded by the kind faces of those that cared for her.

Making whatever world Bel woke up a continuation of this wonderful happy dream—*that* was what Mia needed to do. *That* was her guiding light.

Bel really was a guide for me...

She exhaled before turning to Ludwig.

"Take care of Rina for me, please."

She spared a word for her vassals, who were still dazed and even less able to grasp the situation than she was. Then, she dashed outside the chapel to the grounds of an intricate battle.

Hunched on her knees and already immobile was Valentina. Blood stained her clothes, and her sword had already fallen from her hand. She had exchanged blades with Grammateus, the Sword Saint, leaving her with an injury that was assuredly deep. He stood on guard, rushing into the finishing blow meant to mark the end of Valentina, when the Empire's Finest blocked his path.

"Would you deign to step down?" yelled Grammateus. Then, his sword came crashing down with the swiftness of the divine. His strike was both heavier and faster than Abel's famous downward swing, yet Dion Alaia parried it head-on.

Steel met steel. Both stood their ground. Sparks erupted from their blades, coloring the air around them. From the other side of their swords locked at the hilt, Grammateus offered a quiet question.

"Why do you stop me? Our goals are aligned. I believe our enemy is one and the same." His voice was low, dripping with malice.

Dion, instead, responded with the same nonchalant voice as always. "Kinda strange, huh? Usually, this would all go down with the old master taking pity on his student, protecting her as *I* took the offensive. Listen. That little High Priestess over there is a princess of the country *you* serve, an old pupil that *you* taught the sword."

"You have no need to worry. I am but a sword of Remno. A knight whose blade is devoted solely to His Majesty the king. Thus, doing my duty to my lord is my knightly honor. I will devote my whole being to rid those

who would bring harm to my kingdom."

"Ha ha! I see we feel the same way. In which case, there's no more use for talking, just fulfilling both our duties to our respective lords." The two men jumped back. This time, it was Dion who made the first move. "I can't really say I'm a big fan of this either, but my princess wants this to all end with everyone alive and sound. It's a pain—sorry, a *difficult task*—but whatever. As long as this doesn't happen too often."

"Hah! A pain, you say? Those words are hardly fitting of a vassal to the industrious Great Sage."

Dion's blade crawled across the earth as it offered one strike, then two, then three. Despite their differing trajectories, Grammateus deftly blocked all three.

"Ha! I see you don't know the little princess all too well. You see, 'industrious' isn't a word that describes her at all. She's just the type who's willing to give her all now so she can just relax later!"

Dion gave a sharp thrust of his blade forward, hitting Grammateus's shoulder and throwing him off-balance. Right as he did so, he *also* spun around, slicing at the other expert in the fray—Ka Maku, who successfully blocked with a groan and a furrowed brow.

"Can you refrain from running off on your own? I'm a bit worried it might cause some unexpected casualties. The princess ordered me not to, but...mistakes can always happen." Dion was laughing, but his eyes were clearly cold. His blade was fierce, his swordsmanship deft, and the balance between his animosity for the High Priestess and the orders of his princess delicate.

"Dion! Abel!" came Mia's voice. All eyes turned to her.

"Mia, no! Stay back!" Abel tried to stop her, but there was no chance she would listen—his sword was currently raised, waiting for an opportunity to strike down his sister.

"Abel, if you're worried about me, could you come over here and protect me from close by?" she asked, completely composed. She turned to Dion. "You did well in controlling the situation, Dion."

"Well it took some hell of an effort. So, what's next? Personally, the easiest for me is if you ask me and the Sword Saint to slay our enemies."

"Unfortunately, I want you to take both Princess Valentina and Aima's older brother alive." Knowing what she had to do, her words didn't falter.

“Well, that makes for quite the predicament. For me, having Her Highness Valentina fall into your hands would not be favorable.” Grammateus’s voice grew even deeper. “If that is the case, then I shall give my life to protect my master.”

“I wouldn’t want our elders pushing themselves too hard now,” said Dion. He glanced over to Maku. Then, he returned one of his swords to his scabbard, holding a single blade with both hands.

The air in the room was so charged it gave Mia goose bumps.

“Grammateus, sheathe your sword.” Then came another change in situation—the arrival of the first prince of Remno, Gain. He sauntered over.

“Your Highness... My greetings,” said Grammateus. “What brings you to a place such as this?”

“My dad got a suspicious secret letter, you see. I came to check things out for myself,” he said, taking out the piece of parchment from his coat pocket and throwing it on the ground before them.

“My, it seems I have erred... I should have taken more care in securing the contents of the letter. I failed to move faster, but serving as both guard and assassin is too much for my old bones.”

“Assassin...? Then, my father...he really was the one who ordered my sister’s death.”

“That is not something for me to know. However, I will say that His Majesty is not accustomed to such artifice.”

“Are you saying that’s why he failed to kill her, or that he never plotted to kill Valentina in the first place?”

“I shall leave that to your imagination,” stated Grammateus with a sycophantic bow, eliciting a sigh from Gain. “But to think such a place was on the outskirts of our dear country. I am not typically ignorant, but I had not heard of such a place...”

“It seems like this was built to worship the Archdaemon. Oh, but the cult’s followers are all long dead. Being right on the border of Belluga, a previous king thought it could be useful. He had it secretly repaired.” Next came the carefree and teasing voice of Valentina Remno. She looked around to all present. “Isn’t that right, my old master?”

“Valentina...” croaked Gain, his face pained. “I see you have been well.”

“Oh? Is that sarcasm I sense? You should treat me more kindly. Your master has just left me quite wounded.”

“I also see you haven’t lost your habit of yapping... You should save the pestering for our father when you return.” Gain then looked to Grammateus. “What are you doing? I told you to put away your sword.”

“Unfortunately, Your Highness, I am acting on orders from His Majesty, your father.”

The corner of Gain’s lips twitched. “Huh. So, you won’t listen to me...” He drew his sword. “Will you stick to your orders even if it means cutting me down?”

“That would be most troublesome. Well, in which case, I shall have to knock you unconscious and stick to my orders from His Majesty.”

“I see. Well, that’s perfect.” Gain got into proper stance. “I was just thinking I wanted to test my arm. A match with the Sword Saint of Remno seems to be in order.”

“Oh wow! Tee hee! To think my little brother would choose to protect me. Maybe it’s best I take my leave.” Valentina tottered to her feet and glanced at Maku. “I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“What is it you plan to do?”

He scowled, but Valentina returned that with a gleeful laugh. “Oh, I was just going to add the finishing touches!” she sang before turning on her heels.

“I won’t let you get away! Let’s go, Abel!” Mia couldn’t let Valentina escape. She rushed after her.

“But...” Abel wavered.

Gain looked to his brother and put on a sardonic grin. “Go, Abel. Stop our sister.”

“But, Gain...”

“With your skill, a single strike from Grammateus will have your sword flying. Plus...” Gain looked at Grammateus, his sword still in his hand. “The choice between a king’s orders and the second prince is a no-brainer. But I wonder who *you’ll* choose when it’s the king versus the crown prince.”

Grammateus was silent, earning a laugh from Gain.

“You see how it is, Abel. I’ll stay here and get a lesson from my master. You go. Take her alive and come back here. She’s acted so despicably it won’t feel right unless I get a good chance to tease her.”

“Gain... Understood. Be safe.” With that, Abel and Mia left the scene.

“As if I would let you.” Ka Maku stood before them, blocking their path. However...

“Whoa there. Don’t make light of me, now. It’ll hurt my pride as the Empire’s Finest.”

Dion stepped in from the sidelines, slashing at Maku. He groaned.

“Brother! Please, put away your sword.” That’s when Aima joined the scene, the chaos of the battle obscuring her arrival. She let out a pained cry. “You are fighting against Dion Alaia! *The* Dion Alaia! You will end up dead!”

“Normally, sure, except...I’m under orders from the princess not to kill anyone,” Dion said with a bitter smile. He then turned to Maku. “I really don’t think you have any hopes of winning without a horse under you, so are you sure you want to do this? It seems like your sister and my princess have become friends. It’d be easier for me if you just put away your blade before anyone gets hurt.”

“Preposterous. I will kill you, I will kill the Sword Saint, and I will destroy Remno. Then, I shall return to the High Priestess. What I must do has not changed.”

Dion shook his head and shrugged. “Works for me. Then let’s get to killing each other, shall we?”

With the clamor of a raging battle behind them, Abel and Mia headed for the tower that seemed to reach the clouds above.

“This might be a trap. We should tread carefully.”

“Mia, um... What happened to her?” asked Abel, choosing his words cautiously.

Mia stopped in her tracks. “Oh... I bid her a proper farewell,” she said. Her words were calm, straight, and she looked not at Abel as she said them but what lay right in front of her.

“I see...” His voice stiff, he let out a deep sigh.

“Oh, that’s right...you were hit with an arrow too, weren’t you?”

Mia looked at Abel’s arm. The arrow had been snapped in half, and a cloth was now wrapped around the wound. “My apologies. I didn’t notice at all. Are you all right?”

She reached her hand toward him, but she was stopped by his grim yet heroic proclamation.

“I will take revenge with my own hands. It is not what my brother wishes, but I’ll...”

“You can’t.” Her words were stern. Finally, Mia looked at his face. His eyes were welled up with tears. “We have to bring your sister back with us.”

“But, Mia...”

“We *have* to bring her back alive. We simply must,” said Mia.

Rarely—really, *just* right now—Mia knew exactly what it was she had to do. Bel had shown her the answer.

“Abel, I want you to promise me something—we’ll take Valentina back alive.”

He gritted his teeth, but silently nodded.

Finally, the two arrived at the tower’s peak.

“You’ve been cornered, Valentina,” stated Mia.

The High Priestess stood still beneath the deep blue sky. She leaned against the wall, her face contorted in pain. But as soon as she realized the arrival of Mia and Abel, she stood tall.

“Oh, you made it. I had to wait quite a while.”

“My apologies. Let me reintroduce myself. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon.” She lifted her skirt in a curtsy, all the while glaring the High Priestess down.

“It is a pleasure, Great Sage. I am Valentina Remno, first princess of the Kingdom of Remno and Abel’s elder sister.”

Her charming smile was that of a femme fatale that could ruin countries. She was sullied with blood, but oddly, that only made her beauty even more striking.

“Valentina... How could you do this? How could you be so cruel?!” spat Abel, unable to stay silent.

She shrugged. “Well, I guess it all started when father’s entourage tried to kill me. I was in the process of trying to reform Remno little by little, so it was quite a shock.” She put on a troubled smile. “The Kingdom of Remno is twisted. People’s worth should be decided not by what they were born as, but what they become. At least, that’s what I thought. It’s a bit contradictory coming from someone born into the royal family, but I wanted our government to be decided not by gender or social position, but merit. I was naive...and one day, it all suddenly shattered.”

“That’s not a reason to—” Abel tried to rebut, but he was stopped by a

wave of Valentina's hand.

"Oh, you don't have to bother with that, Abel. I agree. That's not a reason to do what I've done. My ways are mistaken; I know that, and I completely agree. That's why my failure was just the start. Probably, anyways."

Then, she patted her hand over her clothes as if she was looking for something. "Oh, right. I gave my book to Kunlou. Well, so be it." She continued, her voice as persuading as could be. "My personal circumstances are, in the end, inconsequential. It was neither the irrationality enforced by my father and the other nobles nor my failure that made me this way. I simply came face-to-face with the truth—even had I tried my hardest and succeeded in revolutionizing Remno into my ideal vision, within a hundred years, the Chaos Serpents would have ruined all of it." She seemed to be falling into a craze. "The allure of the Serpents is strong. It falls on the defeated with pressing urgency. Having felt this power myself, I read *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth* and was taught the cyclic history of the continent from the High Priestess who preceded me. After that, all my hard efforts just felt silly. Felt stupid. No matter how hard they try, humans—by sake of their own nature—cannot escape the spell of the Serpents. If all should eventually be swept away in the currents of history created by the Serpents, then what meaning is there in swimming against it? Rather, I felt like it was best to throw myself into that flow wholeheartedly."

Her voice reverberated, loquacious as a conman.

Chapter 39: Show Me! The Unfaltering Philosophy of Mia-First!

“In any case, this is a chance that’s hard to come by. I suppose I should make use of this opportunity to take Princess Mia’s life,” Valentina sneered, pulling out her sword and lifting it high above her head.

“Do you think I would let you, sister?” Abel responded by taking out his own sword.

Valentina, instead, calmly cocked her head. “My, you always were so kind, Abel. I see you’re now quite courageous as well. But do you really think you could win against me with *your* skills?”

“Your fight with Grammateus did not leave you unscathed either.”

“I wonder. Well then, shall we see?”

Valentina leaped forward, closing the distance between them in a flash. Her straight strike was neither inferior nor superior to Abel’s, and Mia couldn’t help but feel like something was off. Would the High Priestess of the Serpents really attack from head-on? If so, what must she be after?

“No...”

As soon as the thought occurred to her, she dashed forward, leading to a dramatic shift in circumstance. Their swords collided with a loud *clang*! Abel furrowed his brow, but he held his ground, his teeth gritted. Valentina, on the other hand, could not escape her momentum. She faltered.

Abel had been right—after her fight with Grammateus, her body had reached its limits. She was thrown to the tower’s edge. She let out a cry as she attempted to regain her footing. But she failed. Instead, she was thrown into the air.

“I see you’ve grown quite strong, Abel. Hee! Still, for me, this is ideal...” She seemed to be in rapture as she accepted her fate...and that absolutely ticked Mia off!

“Did you truly think I would allow you to just die?!”

She extended her arms as far as she could, grasping hold of Valentina.

Her weight tugged her forward, but she held firm. Dancing and horsemanship had trained her arms, and she set their mode to full strength. Somehow, she stayed steady.

Valentina scowled. “How strange of you to attempt to save me. I can’t understand you at all.”

“Why, I feel completely the same way, Miss Valentina. What could dying here possibly accomplish?” Mia asked through gritted teeth.

“Hee hee! What a cute question for the Great Sage of the Empire. The answer is obvious. You care for Abel, and thus I sought to hurt him,” she sang. “Being killed by a geezer without much time left would be meaningless, but being killed by my kind younger brother? That would surely hurt him, thus aiding future Serpents.”

“Just for that, you’d truly...?”

“Oh, I have other reasons, of course. If I die, I’m sure Rina will fall as well,” she added with the sweetest of smiles. “I killed her friend. Of course, she will resent me for that. But what if I were to pass? And what if there were no more Serpents for her to hunt? What would become of her then? Would her heart ever heal from its desire for revenge?” She shook her head. “It wouldn’t. The previous friend she lost will never come back to her. Thus, her anger will never disappear. At that point, her resentment will next turn to the Holy Deity himself. ‘Why didn’t you protect her?’ she’ll ask. You see? The Serpents will always return. They revive quite easily.”

Her voice was as unsteady as the possessed or drunk. “If you predicted all that when you chose to save me, then your eyes truly are discerning,” she continued. “However, it will lead to a fallout between you and Citrina. ‘Why would you risk your life to save the person who killed my friend?’ she’ll wonder. But should you let go of my hand now, your relationship with Abel will be ruined quite the same. You’ve really found yourself in a predicament.” Her voice grew jubilant, relieved. “Thus, it doesn’t truly matter what you do. But for the sake of everyone else, wouldn’t it be best to not have people like me in the world? I’ve memorized every single word and line of *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*. Wouldn’t that prove troublesome for you?”

She spoke of her own life as if it was someone else’s. Faced with her soliloquy, Mia...

“In my eyes, no one else matters.” She spoke her words quietly and

firmly. There was nothing that could shake her resolve. “I will not let you die here. I won’t!”

...Yes, Mia was as she always had been. No one else mattered to her. In the end, it was all Mia, all the time. She didn’t care if the Serpents were to swallow up the whole world, for she had only one goal in mind.

I don’t want Abel and my relationship to be on the rocks when Bel is born!

She wanted to welcome her granddaughter into a family filled with warmth, and to do that, she needed to set an example for her children, showing them all how lovey-dovey they were. Thus, Mia steamed ahead with the unfaltering philosophy of Mia-First! She would make sure Abel and she were in the sappiest of happy relationships, and she would make sure that Bel’s dream didn’t end! Fulfilling that promise was what would guide Mia into the future!

“I would love to hear your rationale. Don’t you despise me? All you would need to kill me is to simply let go of my hand, and yet, you’re here desperately trying to save me. It’s really quite perplexing...” Valentina was, put simply...*confused*.

Mia laughed. “Oh, I don’t see any reason to explain myself. I do hate you, after all.” Mia gave a triumphant grin. “How do *you* like it? You can’t understand it, can you? You see, Miss Valentina, there are many things in this world that even you, the High Priestess, cannot understand. There are many things that are outside the bounds of the Chaos Serpents’ will. I really don’t get why you believe you have it all figured out, but...” Her voice grew into a wavering yell. “...Just see where it gets you!”

With Valentina still lost for words, Mia tried with everything she had to pull her up. But then another bloodstained hand appeared from beside her.

“Abel!” she cried.

He had come to stand beside her. Silently, his teeth still clenched, he pulled Valentina to safety.

Chapter 40: In Creeps a Flawed World

After pulling Valentina up onto the tower, Mia and Abel collapsed. Valentina, too, had lost her fighting spirit; she made no attempts to stand, and instead simply lay on the tower's floor.

She put on an exhausted smile. "You decided to save me too, Abel? You really are so kind. Not that that would ever allow you to win against Gain," she gibed.

Mia's grin was instead victorious. "You really don't know anything, do you? Abel has already beat his brother!"

She shook her head, surprised. "My, I see. I would have never expected as much...I always thought you would have grown into a trivial man whose only redeeming quality was the kindness he showed women."

Abel's reply was short. "It's all thanks to Mia..." He glanced at her. Mia sensed guilt deep within his eyes.

"Abel, there is nothing to worry yourself over. I simply saved her for myself, because it would leave *me* feeling terrible. It's not your fault."

Valentina looked at Mia. For the first time, her face was twisted with rage. "Princess Mia, Great Sage of the Tearmoon Empire...just what *are* you?" Her bewilderment and frustration could not be concealed. "You seem to be an anomaly—a deviation from this world—from the flow of history. Truly, what *are* you?"

"I'm..." Mia took a moment to think. "I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, future first empress of the Tearmoon Empire," she stated having found a small ounce of resolve.

This answer...left Valentina with a derisive sneer. "I see. So you're just normal. Nothing but," she muttered, her disappointment clear. "If you are to one day rule the Tearmoon Empire, then you'd best remember this: the logic of the Serpents left Lord Yellowmoon in despair, and I have already sowed its seeds in Rina's heart."

Valentina went on to describe this logic, but it instead only left Mia with the following thought: *this really will prove troublesome*.

The ideals of the Serpents were a terrible nuisance for those who ruled. Should a ruler slack off or fall to sloth, it would sprout in the citizens who were trampled in the process. It was a punishment, a warning for the rulers. So yes, it really was a pain. However...

"Would preventing it not prove easy? You would simply need to feed the weak and defeated." Mia had done just that. Should the stability and joy of that day not be lost, then the masses would not be tempted by the Serpents. "The people must simply be full. When stuffed, no one wants to do anything anyways."

Mia's phrasing inspired a strange laugh from Valentina. "You're quite funny. Tee hee! You're right. Should food be spread across the land, the flames of rebellion will be hard to catch. A lack of food awakens the fear of death, easily putting the hearts of the masses in unrest. And that is exactly the type of crack a Serpent can wiggle into." But then she shook her head. "But that will not last forever. People are foolish. Even should your judgment be wise, there's no guarantee an ignorant ruler will not follow after you. At that point, the sleeping Serpents will then awaken, easily devouring the country the lot of you so diligently forged."

The world will one day be swallowed by the Chaos Serpents. Once the end had come, the Serpents would rule. That was Valentina's assertion, but Mia met it with a laugh of her own.

"There's no need for us to win forever. If we can live in prosperity long enough for my grandchildren to live in peace, that is enough for me. What happens after is not a world that concerns me."

Much like the Serpents, Mia had her own unwavering ideals—the philosophy of Mia-First always stood firm in her heart. Truthfully, troubles that came after she passed were not something she wished to concern herself with. She did hope that the world Bel found herself in would be a good one, but the generations that would make up Bel's children and grandchildren were not something she would bother to care about. They would simply have to reap the benefits of the seeds they sowed for themselves—Mia had learned how to do this, and thus all she could do was to hand this teaching down to future generations.

My grandchildren will be as cautious, genius, and benevolent as I am. Should they rule Tearmoon and forge good relationships with foreign countries, I am certain peace will continue for a long time to come. Should

someone as wise as I am...another ingenious Great Sage be born, then that much is certain...

Sadly, no one could point out Mia's flawed thinking, but nevertheless, in crept that world...

"Thus, all I can do is strive *now*."

"I see. So be it. It makes no difference either way. Still, I've warmed up to you a bit. I'll carefully watch what becomes of you." Then, Valentina giggled.

"Your Highness!"

Suddenly, the Princess Guard flooded in and captured the High Priestess Valentina.

Chapter 41: The Battle's End

The battle below the tower was also reaching its climax.

"Is that really all you've got, Maku?"

Maku groaned. Just barely, he had managed to block Dion's hefty strike. The force of it pushed him back two steps, then three. Dion, on the other hand, did not make use of the opportunity and instead simply waited for Maku to upright himself.

"Really, now. I was all worked up for this, but it's been kind of a letdown. Are you really this weak?"

Dion fought the battle with one eye on Maku and one eye on Grammateus and Gain. Despite always having to keep part of his mind on whether he needed to intervene in the other battle, he was able to maintain quite a bit of casual composure.

However, it seemed that there was nothing to worry about in the first place.

"What's wrong, Grammateus? This wouldn't even make for a mock battle," chided Gain. Despite his words, his next strike was firm—a slash from the upward stance. It was a basic offensive move, and it reminded Dion of a similar strike he once saw from Abel.

It's not as reckless as Prince Abel's, but it's controlled. I see the first prince's skills exceed the rumors. He knows they hold no candle to Grammateus's, so he's making sure he stays on the offensive.

Should Grammateus take the lead, Gain would immediately be neutralized—and he must have known as much, for he maintained the offensive with everything he had. He lacked the ferocity to overcome Grammateus, but had the strength to make sure it was difficult for him to counterattack.

Grammateus, of course, was having a tough time.

Could he just cut Gain down, he would. But this is the Crown Prince. Accidentally killing him would not *be good. Neutralizing a fighter like that without getting him hurt's gotta be quite the task, though... Well, they do say*

experience trumps all. Not that I expect my sword arm to stay so sharp when I'm that old...

While such frivolous thoughts were running through Dion's head, Maku took the initiative. He approached, staggering forward. But then...*slash!* Maku's blade was headed straight for Dion's neck, but Dion managed to shove his own sword in its path right in time. Then, he slid his blade down Maku's, closing the gap between them.

"Isn't it about time you give up already? We all know which one of us is stronger."

"Silence!" Maku roared, taking his *own* step forward. They closed in on each other, locking hilt against hilt in a stalemate much too close for comfort.

"I just don't get it. The warriors of the Fire Clan retreated, and all the Serpents are gone too, yeah? You guys fight by maneuvering in the shadows, so what is fighting me here gonna accomplish for you?" Dion looked across the two blades and into Maku's eyes. "You're not about to tell me you've fallen for the High Priestess, are you?"

Unbeknownst to him, Maku put on a bitter smile. At the same time, he kicked Dion, using the recoil to fall back.

"Fallen for...? I wonder." He studied the blade in his hands before shaking his head. "Her tale is that of a tragic princess abandoned by her country and left heartbroken. It would be an even greater tragedy had she not even a single person willing to die for her. Would you not agree?"

"Hmph. Is that why you're fighting without your wolves? Something about not wanting to get them caught in a battle for *your* pride's sake?"

"It is a personal matter. I will not force my wolves to partake in such."

Dion wasn't sure whether it was affection or sheer loyalty that lay deep in Maku's heart. He, too, could understand the want to die with your master when they faced their final hour. But for some reason, he couldn't get the girl killed by Valentina out of his mind—her death had felt the same as if his true master, Mia, had died. The reason, to him, was a mystery. Yet it left him frustrated to no end.

"I see... Well, I get your point. I can kinda sympathize, but unfortunately, I don't really give a damn what you think." Dion readjusted his grip on his sword and glared at Maku. "Don't think you'll be getting the nice death of a martyr. Not after what you did to that little lady."

Dion was composed, but there was undeniable anger within his words. It was that of the overwhelmingly powerful—one who would easily crush the wolves' dignity and force them into submission. In a flash, he took a step forward and brandished a strike befitting of the Empire's Finest, so absolute in power that not even a skilled swordsman like Maku could defend against.

Still, with only a millisecond to spare, Maku was able to block the attack. At least, he *should* have. The sound now reverberating in the air was the crack of broken metal. Dion's steely strike had snapped Maku's blade in two.

Maku gasped. Dion's first strike flowed into a second. His blade came down on Maku...or rather, the side of the blade came down, sideswiping Maku's right shoulder.

"Agh!"

Maku was flung into the air. He fell the way he had been trained and attempted to stand. However, his shoulder had been rendered useless.

"Brother!" Aima had entered the scene, and she called out in agony as she approached.

To this, Dion shrugged. "A tough guy who had lost the tip of his adamantine spear once told me that it was nothing to worry about. He could just use what was left as a club. And I gotta say, he was right. A sword's just a big clump of metal, and it seems like that's enough to break some bones." He returned his sword to its sheath. "You won't be picking up a blade anytime soon with that arm. Stop with the struggling and surrender. Oh, but...that's it!" Dion clapped his hands. "How about this: if you take your own life, I slit the throat of your dear High Priestess. You should be familiar enough with hostages at this point."

"How unbefitting of the Great Sage of the Empire."

"I'm not acting for the princess—I'm just doing what *I* want. I'll add your wolves and horse to that. I'll have them all die in dignity as devoted warriors. Don't be thinking you'll get to die all nice and easy."

Dion grinned, eliciting a squeal and a shiver...not from Maku, but from Aima. In any case, Dion's words had Maku slumped on the ground, defeated.

Dion's ferocious strike had broken not only Maku, but Grammateus as well.

“How excellent.”

Such a mighty blow was already beyond the old swordsman. Yearning, for a moment, blossomed in his heart, its roots creating a chink in his guard...

“Don’t be getting distracted!”

Gain Remno made use of the opportunity. He could afford no distractions in his battle against the Sword Saint; his concentration was absolutely focused. However, what drove his sword forward was not that; rather, it was the obsessive training he had undertaken ever since his loss to Abel.

He moved in, his eyes trained on Grammateus’s arm. Gain knew that he lacked the artifice or brawn to create a crack in his golden coat. Thus, he focused his efforts on his master’s arms, hoping to rid him of the strength to hold his own sword. Gain had practiced this strike to death, and he was infallible with his accuracy. He slammed his sword against the old man’s arms, knocking the sword right out of his hands.

Grammateus retreated a step with a groan. Gain thrust his sword forward with a scowl.

“You cannot call me a coward any longer, master. It was *you* who turned his eyes away from the battle.”

“You have done excellently, Your Highness. I feel as if I have been shown the bright future that awaits our country.”

“I wonder...” he muttered.

Gain returned his sword to its sheath.

Thus the battle at the Serpents’ hideout had reached its end. Yet how the seeds of evil the Serpents had sowed would sprout was yet a mystery.

“Phew... It’s finally all over.”

Mia had climbed down the tower to find the battle already over. Grammateus had been Gain’s opponent, but now even he had put away his sword and stood by Gain’s side. The sight of the aftermath elicited a big sigh from Mia.

“This whole thing has been quite taxing... I’m famished.” She then clapped her hands together. “This calls for some sweets! Once we’re back home, I’ll have Rania prepare all the sweets we could possibly eat.”

Mia’s mind was filled with the sweet bliss of Saint-Noel—the cakes, the

mushroom stew...she absolutely couldn't wait.

"Oh, but eating so much calls for some exercise. It's been quite a while since I last danced, and I need to make sure Bel keeps up with her lessons. She really can be so irresponsible sometimes. I'll have to make sure I teach her."

"Mia..."

"Abel, could you be her dance partner? Oh, I have to make sure she's keeping up with her studies too! She skips out any chance she gets, so perhaps I can lure her with some sweets...and then...we'll..."

Suddenly, her vision blurred as if her head had been plunged into water.

"I... I had so many things to teach her, and so many tasty things I wanted to eat together...and...Bel..."

The dam had broken. Now, her warm tears flowed freely down her cheeks.

"Why did she have to...? Bel...!" she sobbed.

As soon as the first cry had escaped her lips, someone had come to embrace her. It was an awkward hug. Only one arm wrapped around her, and yet, she clung to the boy with everything she had, burying her face deep in his chest.

Thus, Mia cried in Abel's arms. She paid no mind to public eye as she bawled like a young child. Still, she went unjudged.

Ludwig took care of the rest. After seeing Mia's intense enervation, he entrusted her to Anne and quickly got to handling what had to be handled. Valentina would be left under the care of the Holy Principality of Belluga. Remno was doubtfully in agreement, but this sabotage plot had involved multiple countries, limiting their sway. However, another fate awaited Ka Maku...

The day that the Chief of the Fire Clan was brought before the Holy Lady, he was greeted with a solemn declaration.

"Ka Maku, I will be blunt with my words. You will be tasked with suppressing the Serpent shamans."

"You would have *me* do such?"

"Yes. As their former conspirator, I am sure you'll have no trouble in tracking them. You will be hunting your old comrades. Oh, but there is no need to kill them. Rather, you should refrain from doing so. Please tie them up and deliver them to me alive. From this moment forward, you are banned from taking lives."

"You are going easy on me, Holy Lady Rafina. You do not fear I will betray you?"

"No, I do not. For if you betray me...Valentina shall be executed."

"I am a hostage, then... You and Dion Alaia are kindred spirits. I hope this was not a suggestion from the Great Sage. It would be unbecoming of her."

His ridicule was met with a tilt of Rafina's head. "Would it? I'm sure you know exactly who this is meant to please. You're not so much of an imbecile to not know, are you, wolfmaster?" Her words were uncharacteristically cold. "Honestly, I wish I could be harsher, but there is nothing I can do. This was Mia's proposal, and it does have its advantages. Your tracking abilities are excellent, and they will allow us to eliminate as many future roots of evil as is possible. That is enough reason not to kill you and Valentina."

"So you demand that I atone for the sins of my master and I by my own hand."

"No. The sins of people are not for people to absolve; only the Holy Deity can accomplish such. If you lack the heart to repent before Him, you shall not be granted salvation." Her words were righteous and unforgiving.

“All you can do is buy time, to struggle to create as many opportunities for penitence as possible. Still, I feel that even that much is far too gracious to bestow upon you.”

“Yes. With that, I agree. I shall simply appreciate the grace that has been offered to me.”

He bowed his head.

“Update me regularly. There will be soldiers from Belluga with you to act as my eyes, but my country unfortunately lacks a talent such as you or Dion Alaia. Thus, it will be your job to watch them as well, ’o faithful Serpent swordsman.”

He gave a wordless nod. Their meeting was over.

Chapter 42: In Search of Mia-First

Time flowed ever onward, and in a flash, six months passed. The flowers of spring once again began to blossom at Saint-Noel.

"Well then, milady. I'll be off to my meeting with the school officials."

"Yes, thank you, Anne. Having help from the staff is essential for the entrance commemoration party."

After exchanging words with Anne, Mia headed alone to the library. Student council elections were soon upon them, and she needed to craft her campaign pledge.

"Hmph. I have to write this every year, yet it never gets easier. I wish I could hurry and just return the seat to Miss Rafina..." Despite her grumblings, the events leading to Mia's election flashed through her mind. "Oho! Had Bel not shown up, I'd never have been student council president, would I?"

Rafina's insistence had gotten Mia to join the council, but she would have never imagined she would have battled her for the seat of president.

"So many things happened thanks to her... I'm sure that if Bel had never come, my life would be quite different."

It didn't end with the student council—Bel was instrumental in shaping her relationships with the Four Dukes.

"Sapphias might have even become my enemy! The world really is full of mysteries."

He was quite reliable now, but he had been awfully pretentious when they had first met. She didn't even want to imagine what would have become of their relationship if it weren't for that student council election.

"My relationship with the Yellowmoons would have been quite changed as well...not to mention Rina..."

With that, the recent source of her troubles had returned to her.

"She always tries to be so calm, but she really is pushing herself, isn't she...?"

Citrina had become a lifeless zombie during the week following Bel's

passing. Conversation was beyond her, and her expression remained unchanged. However, the efforts of Esmeralda and Mia gradually revitalized her. There were now times she showed her sweet smile, and she was a frequent attendee to their tea parties. At first glance, she appeared to be the same as she always had been. But her sweet smile was now changed —no longer was it as innocent, and no longer was it from the heart.

On the surface, Rina appeared to be at peace. However, it was clear that it was a *forced* peace. Mia and the others were terribly worried about her.

"If only I could tell her the truth about Bel..."

Mia had thought to reveal things to just Citrina, and yet she absolutely refused to hear it, insisting that she had promised to hear it straight from her friend herself.

Citrina had told her thus, tears welling in her eyes: "It's all right. Rina knows Bel didn't die. I don't quite understand, but I think that she's like an angel. For now, she's just returned to heaven. But I'm certain that one day, she'll be back...and when she is, she'll tell me everything..." Mia didn't have the heart to spill Bel's secret after hearing all that.

"I know I need to do something for her, but...this is quite the dilemma. Perhaps all she needs is some time."

Mia had yet to explain things to Ludwig and the others either. For now, Mia had succeeded in staving them off with the promise that she'd explain things *eventually*, but when "eventually" finally came, what would she say?

"Maybe I should go ahead with the 'Bel is an angel' theory... Ah, there really is too much to worry about." She yawned and blinked the sleep out of her eyes. "I'm a bit tired. I wonder if I've been having bad dreams lately..."

Now that it was just Anne and Mia in their shared bedroom, it felt empty. The melancholy kept Mia's eyes glued wide awake.

"How strange. Until just a few months ago, it felt so cramped I could barely breathe... Oho! That Bel, she really was quite energetic."

Even now, she would search for the ghost of Bel inside their room. She could still hear the phantom call of "grandmother!" within her ears.

"I'll have to do my best for her sake as well." Once again, she let out a drawn-out yawn. "My, this won't do. I'm too sleepy! And there's no better time to sleep than when I'm sleepy."

She put her cheek against the library desk and closed her eyes.

"I really would like another guide, or even just a hint of what I need to

think about. I wonder if I could find something here. Perhaps the *Princess Chronicles* or my diary is still stuck on a shelf somewhere... Oh, a history book from the future would do nicely as well...”

Just as that thought passed through her mind, the corner of her eye caught a glimpse of gold coming from the bookshelves.

“Bel...?”

Her face bolted up, and she turned her head toward the source. However, she must have been hallucinating. The aureate shimmer was gone.

She shook her head with a bitter smile. “Or something! Oho ho! I’m growing quite soft. I have to stay focused so I can be the kind of grandmother Bel will be proud of!”

Mia was certain that a world where her children and grandchildren could live at peace—a kind world for Bel to wake up in—would also be the road to her *own* happiness. Thus, Mia’s pursuit of Mia-First continued.

“Still, I really do need a guide to be able to work my hardest. Something sweet would do as well...”

She never yielded—except for the times she decided to nap instead—as she walked forward. She was Mia, and she would never be anything but. But where would that walk lead her? What would be waiting for her and her empire? What world would the guiding moonlight of the Great Sage bring forth?

Those were all questions for another day.

Epilogue: The Happy Dream Lives On

Blink. Blink blink.

The tears of sleep blurred the girl's eyes, and she rubbed them awake. With a loud yawn, Imperial Princess Miabel Luna Tearmoon looked around the room.

Huh? Where am I?

It was lavish, spacious, featuring a huge bed that she had been laid upon. The warm and fluffy comforter threatened to pull her back to sleep when suddenly, previous events came flooding back to her—the dilapidated castle of the Serpents, the eerie chapel...and the fact she had an arrow sticking out of her neck!

"M-M-My neck! My neck, my neck, my neeeeeeck!"

She frantically patted her neck, but there were no arrows to be found.

"H-Huh...?"

She once again looked around. But this time, she realized where she was.

"This is Grandmother Mia's room in Whitemoon Palace..."

This was Bel's favorite hiding place, where she had come running whenever she faced any troubles ever since she was young. There, her kind grandmother would save her from anything.

"That's right. I'm Miabel Luna Tearmoon, princess of the Tearmoon Empire and granddaughter of the Great Sage..."

Her memories were certain—as the princess of this nation, she had been raised by those she loved right here in the Whitemoon Palace. This was Tearmoon's capital; thus, memories of a ruined Lunatear or life in the slums shouldn't be with her.

"Was that all a dream? But..."

"My, Bel. So this is where you went."

A woman was now standing at the doorway. The hair of Lunatear's radiant moon was as long as she was now tall. It was Bel's beloved grandmother, Mia Luna Tearmoon.

“Ludwig’s been looking for you! You can’t be running away during your lessons. The more knowledge you have, the better. Memorizing it all is nothing...”

“Miss Mia... I...”

Mia tilted her head. “‘Miss Mia’?”

Bel gasped and brought her hands to her mouth. “H-Huh? *Miss* Mia? How strange. I was pulled inside my dream. It’s ‘grandmother,’ isn’t it?”

The memories now inside her head and the memories of her dream oddly felt equally real to Bel, both equally precious...

“You’d never guess the dream I just had, grandmother! It was so strange, but it was so fun! I went back in time, to when *you* were young, and I even went on an amazing adventure! I attended Saint-Noel Academy, and you were there, and so was Grandfather Abel! And the Libra King, and Keithwood the Loyal, and Mother Anne and Mother Elise and Mr. Ludwig...and...and...Rina was there!”

Bel was terribly excited. She let out a giggle.

“It really was a wonderful dream. Tee hee! It was so fun...I wanted to stay there forever. Isn’t that strange? It was just a dream...” She stroked her own neck. “But then I got hit in the neck by an arrow and died! I’m a princess, so it doesn’t make sense that I’d be somewhere so dangerous. It really was ever so strange...”

Suddenly, Bel realized the tug of a string around her neck. Attached to it was a stiff clump of fur. She pulled its length, taking it out of her collar and revealing...a wizened troya.

“What’s...this...?”

A brilliant scene had returned to life before her; the blissful smile of her bestest friend as she accepted the gift passed before her eyes. Bel looked up to find the gentle smile of her grandmother. She spoke her next words sentimentally, lines crinkling around her eyes.

“I see... So this is where that day led you...”

Mia took a seat beside Miabel.

“Grandmother...I...”

Mia wrapped her arms around Bel’s head, pulling her close. The hugs Bel had received from her grandmother were innumerable, but for some reason, this one was filled with poignant nostalgia.

“Welcome back, Bel. I hope I was able to keep my promise.”

“Your promise?”

“Yes, the promise I made to you all the way back when. Can this be the continuation of your dream? Was I able to keep your dream alive?”

Bel gasped. A scene flashed beneath her eyelids—the young face of her grandmother, her chest puffed out as she declared, “I won’t let your dream end!”

“Miss Mia...”

“Let’s take our time. There’s so much to tell you—what happened after all that, where we’re all heading now. But first...” Mia flashed her a mischievous smile. “...Let’s call the others. I’m sure they’re all dying to speak with you.”

Thus, a happy dream was passed from grandmother to granddaughter. This was the continuation of Bel’s fun and happy dream—the fruits of Mia’s labor that started at the guillotine.

True Epilogue: Th-There's More?!

"Ngh... Fwaaaaah! I overslept..."

Mia wasn't sure just when she had fallen asleep, but here she was, her face firmly planted into one of the library's desks. She let out another yawn before realizing...an anomaly.

Huh? Isn't it bright in here?

It would make sense if she had slept so long that she was waking up to the dusk of the setting sun. But that wasn't the case. It was brighter in here than it had been before, somehow. She sleepily looked around, which instead jolted her awake. She had found the light's source—a golden glow coming from the bookshelf.

"Wh-What?! N-No way...!" Her voice wavered as she made her way to the light's source.

She wouldn't get her hopes up. Such a miracle was impossible. However, they also say that a miracle that happens twice will come again. Before she had fallen asleep, the same light had appeared to her. The circumstances were similar—once before, Mia had come looking for a guide and found Bel. Now, she had come again for the same. She wanted to help Citrina recover from her gloom.

Could it really be true? Mia's heart wavered between her want to believe and fear of the betrayal that was disappointment. But the light didn't seem to care—it began to take on human shape. A girl with pallid gold hair that reached down her back, blue eyes, and a face that resembled Mia's appeared before her. Mia was shocked, but before her was now Bel, darting her eyes about the room.

"Oh! Grandmother Mia!" She gave Mia a glowing smile. "It's been so long, Gra—I mean, Miss Mia."

Then, she pulled her skirt up into a curtsy in a move the embodied princessly grace. It had Mia hanging her mouth open in shock.

"Bel... Is that really you? Are you all right?"

Things were happening so fast Mia could barely keep up. Previously,

Bel had come from a war-torn Lunatear in the midst of running from a pursuer after her life. However, the Bel before her did not look to have been under such distress—her clothes were well-kept, but more importantly, she now had the grace befitting a princess.

"Thanks to all your efforts, Tearmoon is perfectly calm and stable! My mother and I and everyone else are living there very comfortably." Bel was grinning. "It's all because you kept your promise! You didn't let my dream end, so... Thank you."

Those words elicited a sigh from Mia. "I see. I'm glad, but...if that's the case, then what brings you here?"

"Oh, right! According to Mr. Ludwig, that's because of you, Grandmother Mia... Oh! But not in a bad way..."

"Because of me? And Ludwig said that? Just what is that supposed to —? Hm?"

Mia suddenly realized that something was *off*. And it wasn't with Bel...it was with the space *behind* her. The light Bel had come through hadn't faded. Rather, it was still burning bright, and a close look into it revealed...a mysterious *squirming* shadow!

"Eek!" Mia gasped, for out came...a young girl. She looked no older than ten, and she tilted her head as she peered into Mia's face. Her head was bobbed like the traditional dolls of the Eastern lands, her bangs cut straight across her forehead. Its color was the same pale gold as Mia's hair, and the eyes hidden behind her long lashes were *also* the same color as Mia and Bel's. And just in general...something about her face was so Bel-like.
"...Huh?! Th-There's more?!"

Mia attempted to be lighthearted! The situation was rather uncommon, so it was easy to understand the sentiment. For one, Bel's reappearance had been, to Mia, within the realm of possibility. But another one? That was absurd.

"Bel...who is that?" The crazy turn of events had Mia's eyes doing somersaults within her skull. However, she stopped it with a clap of her hands. "Oho... I think I get it! Something happened in the future and that girl is...your sister? Or maybe another relative. In any case, she's running from danger, yes?"

Mia hadn't worked so hard during these past six months just for show. She had upped her "genius" to the max, fueling it to full power through a

sweets-powered engine. Formulating a hypothesis given her current information was a piece of cake (literally), and she laid it out to those before her.

“The source of your troubles is in this time, so you came back in order to do something about it! Am I right?”

Confident in her deduction, she pushed out her chest with a smug grin. However...

“She’s...” Bel said, giving Mia a serious stare.

She turned to the girl beside her.

“She’s...”

She cleared her throat, and then she...

“...Uh, I don’t know who she is!”

...Hung her head in complete confusion.

“...Huh?” came Mia.

Thus, once again, the tale of grandmother and granddaughter continued.

To Be Continued in Part 5: A Princess’s Respite

Individual Epilogues and...

After their showdown with the High Priestess, Mia and crew returned to Saint-Noel. Having been beset by all the various necessities needed to bring the situation to a close, it was not until red tinged the leaves that they stepped back inside the academy.

However, their efforts had not been for naught. There was much gained in the process, including the restabilization of Sunkland's political climate, the reconciliation of the Equestrian Kingdom's thirteen clans, and the capture of the High Priestess. However, the fruitful journey did not see the heroes return with smiles on their faces, for what they had lost had been too great.

Still, life continued. The flow of time was cruel yet kind; it did not stop as their hearts had. Thus, while the tracks of the grieving had been temporarily stopped, they all eventually found the strength to once again walk forward.

Anne Littstein—Making an Empty Bed

Having returned to Saint-Noel, the days awaiting Anne Littstein were the ones she always spent. Once Mia had grumbled, "Ugh... All the studying from the days I missed has really piled up," and headed off for class, Anne returned to their room.

"First is making the beds," said Anne.

While Mia enjoyed her school life, Anne was beset with work—cleaning their room, bonding with the other staff, exchanging information with the servants of other nobles. It was endless, and the responsibility of making Mia's bed was just another of her many responsibilities. Determined to give the task her all in order to assure that Mia got the good night's rest she needed, Anne returned to their room, only to find a crowd forming at the door.

"Um, excuse me?"

Hearing her, the gathered men turned around. “Oh, Anne. Perfect timing.”

Anne knew these men. They were staff for the dorms. They flashed her a courteous smile before gesturing at the door. “This is the room we needed to remove a bed from, right?”

The smile remained on his face. It was an innocent question, a simple request for necessary information. Still, Anne’s heart gave a painful twang. They had come to remove Bel’s bed, and yet they asked as if it were nothing, as if this were only natural.

“Um...?” His confused stare jolted Anne back to her senses. She put on a forced smile before speaking herself. “Yes, you’re correct. It’s the one farthest to the left.”

“Got it. We’ll go ahead and move the bed, so stay back for now.”

At Anne’s word, the men got to work. It was a purely professional task —the person who had once used the bed was now gone, and thus it no longer had a use in this room. It needed to be removed. It really was as simple as that...yet...

To Anne, it seemed like the saddest thing in the world.

The girl who slept there—the girl who resembled Mia and often mistakenly called Anne “mother,” the girl whose charm let her get away with calling Mia “grandmother”—had been here and tangible just days earlier.

But that cheerful girl was no longer. She would never again oversleep, and Anne would never have to wake her up alongside Mia after she did. She would never serve her tea nor dress her ever again, for Bel had disappeared into the light. It was tragic, enough to break her.

“Is something the matter, Anne?”

She lifted her head to find one of the staff giving her a worried stare.

“Ah! No. It... It is nothing. Please continue.”

Anne rushed to the side of the door and watched as the bed left the room —but that’s when she saw something fall from the sheets.

“Huh?”

It was a stale cookie! And it rolled and rolled, tumbling along the hallway until it rolled straight into someone’s shoe and flopped on the floor. They picked it up.

“...I see. So she was eating in bed.”

The owner of the shoe was Mia, and her expression was that of complete exasperation.

She shook her head. “That girl is really something... I’ll have to give her a scolding. A *harsh* one,” she muttered as she wrote a note in the corner of her diary. “Eating in bed is absolutely out of the question! I can’t believe that girl!” Mia now adorned a bitter smile, her eyes closed as she found herself lost in memories. “But it will be quite a while until I can make my warning...I better make sure I remember.” Anne gave her a curious look, which Mia met with a kind smile. “I’ll explain everything one day... It’s all right. We’ll be able to meet her again, Anne.”

Common sense would tell anyone that was preposterous. An arrow had pierced Bel’s throat, and she had disappeared into the light. Thus, it was clear that Mia’s words were mere consolation. Still, they had saved Anne, for coming from Mia, she felt that they were believable.

“Huh? But what happened to going to class, milady?”

“Ah! That’s right! The schedule suddenly changed and my next class is now advanced arithmetic! I thought you’d like to attend, so I came to get you.”

With that, Mia grabbed her hand and tugged her along. Anne felt that her feet were about to fall out from under her, yet she still spared a glance behind her. For a moment, on the other side of the bed, she thought she had seen a glimpse of a grinning Bel.

“Again, someday...” she muttered before breaking into a run.

Far in the future in days bathed in bliss, the Whitemoon Palace was on edge. It was the twenty-third year of Empress Mia’s reign, and Mia’s daughter, third princess Patricianne Luna Tearmoon (aka Trisha) would soon give birth to her first child. Though whether it would be a boy or girl was still anybody’s guess.

At the onset of the news, the servants of the castle were swamped with preparations, but Mia’s veteran and personal maid, Anne Littstein, was perfectly calm.

“It will be a girl, so please prepare accordingly.”

“How do you know that, madam?” asked one of the young maids.

Anne responded with a confident grin and puffed-out chest. “...Because I have long served milady.”

And it seemed that Empress Mia had thought the same, for she had the new room prepared for a princess. The room was in perfect order, but Anne had quietly slipped inside.

Are we missing anything?

There was not a single speck of dust, and to stop the child from getting hurt, the furniture all had its corners rounded. Anne checked each piece one by one until she came to a stop—the cradle was infinitesimally smaller than the bed *she* had once slept in. So much was obvious; the beds at the dormitory were far too big for an infant. Anne lovingly rearranged the blankets, waiting eagerly for time to pass.

"Lady Bel...we shall meet once again."

Presents to celebrate the girl's birth had been placed around the cradle, the most eye-catching of which being a horse-sized troya handmade by Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon. It brought Anne back to the days of horse-shaped bread.

She giggled. "That really was such a fond time. Milady was having so much fun, right along with everyone else."

It was no longer easy to see everyone, but each of their faces flashed through her mind—among them was *her*.

"Oh, Anne! So this is where you were."

Anne turned around to find Mia entering the room.

"M-Milady!" Anne hurried to straighten herself.

Mia's expression was sour. "Could you leave this to the others and go to Trisha? She seemed quite nervous. That girl is pitiful! I just wonder where she gets her cowardice from..."

Mia held her hands to her hips and sighed under her breath. It had Anne breaking into a grin—Princess Trisha was *exactly* like Mia had once been, both in her cowardliness and frankness.

"Hm? Did I say something strange?"

"No, it is nothing. Well then, let us go, milady."

"No. I... I will be staying here." Mia averted her eyes. She didn't have the guts to be present while her daughter gave birth.

"It'll be fine, milady! The royal physician is excellent, and this is Lady Bel's birth after all."

"Hm... Well, I suppose so..." Mia mumbled.

"Lady Bel would surely laugh should she have heard that."

Mia cleared her throat. “Yes, you’re right. How vexing... Well then, I guess there’s no avoiding it. The gracious mother will have to go comfort her chicken-hearted daughter.”

Mia turned around, and Anne quickly followed after. It was a scene as common in their childhoods as it was now, unchanging from the days *she* was still here—the continuation of her dream.

Ludwig Hewitt—Uncompleted Workbooks and Mistaken Answers

After parting with the others at the island of Saint-Noel, Ludwig headed straight for the capital of Lunatear. He was so beset with work that he had no time to feel the exhaustion of his long journey. Despite his careful preparations so his absence could not cause any large issues, there were still many after his opinions.

He sighed. “I see I’ll need to do something about this if I want to avoid future troubles. If only I had someone of talent to rely on...”

For now, it seemed like he would have to wait for a graduate of Galv or Saint Mia Academy. With a sigh, he removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes before reaching for the next papers in his long list of documents. But then something felt *off*.

“Oh, yes. This is...” There was a bundle of papers pushed to the corner of his desk. “I suppose there’s no use for them now...”

They were teaching materials created under Mia’s orders, specially crafted by Ludwig for the education of Miabel.

“Still, it was quite a hefty task for a request from Her Highness...”

Truthfully, Miabel was a poor student. Her head might have been perfectly fine, but she had a talent for skipping class. In fact, she seemed so knowledgeable on how to avoid his questions that Ludwig often felt she could see right through him.

“She really was quite the strange girl...”

From the moment they met, she had called him “Professor.” But no matter how many times Ludwig tried to put a stop to it, she didn’t listen at all. In fact, every time he chastised her, he began to feel more and more stupid, and eventually, he just resolved to let it be.

“I wonder just who she was...”

She resembled Mia, and yet, the two girls had completely different appeals. Bel’s studies were definitely in need of some development, but there was something about her that could draw anyone in.

“Was she a relative of Her Highness? Or perhaps...”

Suddenly, Bel’s final moment flashed before him. Bathed in light, she had disappeared. She couldn’t have just been a normal girl. She must have had some spectacular circumstances surrounding her. But the *real* feeling that lay in Ludwig’s heart was...

“What a shame,” he muttered.

...yes, that it was a shame. Nothing more, nothing less.

“I still had much to teach her...”

There were things he believed would prove beneficial for her future self, precious axioms anyone living in this world needed to know. Ludwig might have been weak, but there were still so many things he could have taught her. And yet...

Crumple! A sound reverberated from his hand. He had been gripping the papers, squeezing them to death. The emotion now swirling in his chest was immeasurable regret—the consuming remorse of not being able to prevent that tragedy.

“Damn it... Why was I not able to predict this?”

It had been a complete failure. Convinced that their foes would be after Mia, he had let his guard down. Or perhaps he had been under the irresponsible belief that he could simply leave it all to Mia. She was the Great Sage of the Empire, after all.

His regret shifted to a bubbling anger, and then he directed it at himself. It pushed him to his feet, moving to throw the papers in the garbage bin with all the strength he could muster.

Except...he didn’t. At the final moment, his hand froze.

“Her Highness said we would be meeting once again.”

Frankly, to Ludwig, they sounded like empty words of comfort. There was no meeting a person who had already passed on. And if there were, that would surely be when his *own* life had passed.

Still, Mia had said thus: “Don’t worry. We’ll surely all meet Bel once again. So I want you to save all the materials you’ve made... I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night should she stay so half-hearted in her learning.” Those

words were quiet, spoken as if they were the most obvious thing in the world.

"So, we'll meet again, huh...?" Ludwig returned the bundle of papers to his desk and carefully straightened them out. "If Her Highness says so...I shall believe it, impossible as it may sound."

Quietly, carefully, he put the papers in order. It was as if he believed that only should he remove every crease, Miabel would return.

"Hm... I can't exactly leave the papers like this in good faith. I still have much to teach her. Why don't I take the opportunity to write more and bind it into a proper book...?"

Silently, Ludwig had made his resolve: he would use it as a textbook, teaching her everything he could when next they could meet.

We now find ourselves in the far future in the promised day of bliss when Princess Miabel would be born into the world.

"My apologies, Sir Ludwig."

Selia, genius right hand to the chancellor, stepped inside his office. Galv had a heavy hand in her education at Saint Mia Academy, and it allowed her talents to blossom, bringing glory to Saint Mia Academy and spreading its founder's (Mia's) authority throughout the continent. However, as soon as she stepped inside, a scowl adorned her face—before her was Ludwig, holding some documents and adorning a scowl of his own.

"What is it, Selia? Do you come with a report?" Ludwig spared not even a glance from his work.

Selia responded with a bitter smile. "Yes, Chancellor. From the royal physician."

"The royal physician...? Ah...I see. So that is today..." Ludwig finally pulled his eyes away from his papers with a guilty grin. "How dreadful. Time just flies while I work."

"Aren't you working too hard? I'm sure your wife is worried about you."

"Ha ha! Unfortunately, my wife is even more dedicated to her work than I am. Even our kids worry for her," he said with a laugh before standing up to stretch. "Thank you for informing me. I'll head over as soon as I finish with my preparations."

After seeing Selia off, Ludwig headed to the bookshelves. There contained the accumulation of all Tearmoon's knowledge. Treaties, histories of noble families, the Empire's origins, the crops of each region—all information needed to run the Empire was collected there, built up over the centuries. When the chancellor's office had once been engulfed in flames, Ludwig had risked his life to carry these treasures to safety.

However, there was a corner of the shelves that did not fit in with the rest. To the bottom right on the lowest level was something irreplaceable to Ludwig—handmade textbooks written with the help of his comrades. All children of Empress Mia were taught by Chancellor Ludwig. It was a set rule with no exceptions, decreed by the empress herself.

When the suggestion had first been made to Ludwig, he had been uncertain. His talent paled to his master, the Wandering Wiseman Galv. As incompetent as he was, could he truly teach the progeny of the Great Sage of the Empire...?

However, his uncertainty lasted for only an instant. Should Mia ask him of it, he only need face the task to his full ability. That was part of the reason. However...more importantly was the fact he had already instructed *her*. Thus, Ludwig borrowed the help of those around him to make textbooks fit for each prince and princess, using them in his classes. In fact, he was so fastidious in this task he incurred the jealousy of the empress herself.

"You're quite a bit more lenient than when you taught me. How unfair," she'd say with a bitter smile. Not that Ludwig had any recollections of teaching her...

Thus, there were nine volumes in total, eight for each of Mia's children, and one more...

Ludwig took the oldest in his hand—it was the crudest of the bunch, a pile of papers simply fastened together by twine. Opening the book revealed all the questions answered up to the very last page, just as was the case with the other textbooks. However...

"She got the last question wrong, I see..."

He had yet to be able to correct her. He shook his head with a bitter smile.

"To think I'll finally be able to set her right...but by the moons, it really did take quite some time..."

Ludwig returned the book to the shelf and stepped out of his office. He was off to greet a girl he had long waited to see—to celebrate the birth of a new princess.

Dion Alaia—The "General"

In a corner of Lunatear was the office of the Princess Guard, equipped with a small ground for drills. Now, it was also the current location of the Empire's finest knight, Dion Alaia. Holding his beloved sword high in the air with both hands, he carelessly swung it to the ground. A straw soldier snapped in two, and Dion went on cutting down each and every one in his vicinity like the flowing tide.

To most, his movements seemed to be fitting of the name "the Empire's Finest"—they were the gruffness of a warrior god. However, for those who knew him, it would surely alert them that something was awry.

Having split the last straw soldier in half, Dion put away his sword with a deprecating smile. "It's not like me to get so caught up in my emotions... Guess I've built up a bit too much frustration."

"Sir Dion."

Dion turned around to find someone entering the drill grounds. "Well, if it isn't Sir Ludwig! Finally finish all that work you had piled up?"

Ludwig shrugged. "Just about, I suppose." As he spoke, Ludwig picked up the miserable remnants of a straw soldier by his feet, examining its wound. "I was lucky to catch you training. Your skills are as impressive as always."

"Well, I'm always happy for the praise, but any of the Princess Guard could do this much," he grumbled, beginning to clean up the mess he created. "You can't really call this training, anyway. It's just a distraction..."

Having put that to words, Dion made a sudden realization. *Huh, I'm not frustrated; I'm just angry. I don't remember being so soft...*

For a moment, his hand froze. It still gripped the carcass of one of the straw soldiers. "How does the little princess plan on settling all this?" asked Dion, not meeting Ludwig's gaze.

"Settle what, exactly...?"

"Don't act dumb! I'm talking about what happened with the little lady."

The "little lady"—the girl named Bel. Her origins remained a mystery,

but she had died at the Serpents' castle. On the battlefield, people died all the time. Dion didn't have the time to mind every single one; it would be impossible to handle. Still, the two emotions dominating his heart at the moment were clear: anger and malice.

"If it's to get intel out of the Serpents, then sure. But after that's all over with, there's no need to let them live, right?" He placed his hand on the sword at his hips.

Ludwig watched in silence before shaking his head. "I am certain Her Highness does not wish such."

His voice was quiet, yet firm. Ludwig was faced with an armed man, and yet he made that statement without wavering at all. It put a bitter smile on Dion's lips.

"So you're gonna try to stop me with pure will? That's quite the decision. But well..." Dion took a moment to think. He decided to slightly shift his argument. "Choosing to keep your enemies alive isn't purely good."

"Could you elaborate?"

"Oh, I'm sure you get it. If you show nonsensical mercy, it's gonna hurt the troops' morale. If you don't show anger when you need to—like, hm...when one of your comrades has been killed—your troops aren't gonna follow you."

"I see... Yes, that is certainly true. However, Her Highness has chosen to keep them alive despite that concern. However, to me, it appears as if you're trying to force logic. In truth, all you want is to cut them down."

Ludwig's words were right on the money. Dion shrugged in defeat. "Damn, so that didn't work... I was thinking that if I had some reasoning it'd be easier to convince you... But I gotta say, I'm impressed that you'd stand your ground when you're unarmed and up against *me*."

Ludwig responded to his frankness with a bitter smile. Then, he took a moment to adjust his glasses. "Well, to speak truthfully, I'd also like nothing more than to smash their heads in with one of those wine bottles. Alas..." His words were cold, yet that quickly melted away. "...We are not in the position to act on our own wills."

"Whoa there, hold on a second. I'm not dedicated to the princess for *life*. If she does something I'm not down with, I'll cut my ties right then and there."

“And yet, you haven’t. Am I correct?”

“You know how to hit where it hurts,” grumbled Dion with a sigh. Ludwig seemed to take that as a “yes.”

“As of yet, there are no faults to be found in the path Her Highness has laid out for us, even if there might have been a hiccup or two. Plus, Her Highness also made it clear that killing the High Priestess and Maku would not be for Bel’s sake—that it would instead only leave her sad and—”

“Enough with that crap,” cut in Dion, his words as sharp as a swing of his blade. “Sure, the first half of that is all true. Our little princess is quite the talent. But the rest of that is just clichés. Once someone dies, that’s the end. You don’t see them again. Ever. Leaving criminals alive because that’s what *she* would want is just lip service—an insincere farce.”

Dion had met with the death of his subordinates time and time again on the battlefield. His feelings were strong. Death was irreversible; there was nothing you could do about it. That’s how unforgivable enemies continued to be created.

Ludwig, in response, was quiet. “I wonder...”

“You gonna say I’m wrong? That the dead can come back to life? Damn, I thought you were more reasonable than this.” Dion gave an exaggerated shrug. “Or maybe since she disappeared into the light like that, you’ve decided to believe in miracles? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“Of course, that is a part of it, yes. But most importantly, Her Highness has said it to be true.”

“So you’ll just believe whatever comes out of the princess’s mouth?”

“No, I will of course doubt what deserves doubting. I am cautious to not fall into the pit of being nonthinking. However, when my own considerations do not leave me with an answer, that leaves only two choices: to believe her or not to believe her. Thus, I choose to believe her, and I make sure I think things through with that in mind.” With that, Ludwig put on a mischievous smile. “Plus, Sir Dion, I will leave you with this advice out of my kindness: it is best not to take the words of Her Highness—of the Great Sage of the Empire—at face value. Her words are deeper than we could ever imagine.”

“Hm. Well, whatever. If that’s the case, I’ll take a chance and believe you. But I’m a bit intrigued by this ‘unknowable depth’ to her words. I guess I’ll just have to stick around to see what this could all mean...as her

sword, of course."

Suddenly, he heard a voice: "I knew I could trust you, General Dion!"

He heard a phantom of *her* voice, and it left him with a bitter smile. *If I really do meet her again, I've gotta make sure she knows I'm not a "general"...*

We now find ourselves in the far future in the promised day of bliss when Dion has long held that very title.

That day, a regular council meeting was held in the Ebony Moon Ministry.

"So, the Holy Lady will be attending Her Imperial Majesty's birthday festival?" asked a young officer who was present at the council for the first time.

One of his veterans responded with a laugh. "Oh, and that's not the end of it. There's King Sion of Sunkland and a whole bunch of big shots from all over coming together in one place. It might be the biggest event in the whole continent."

That description left Dion wincing. "Damn, it's always like this, but the princess's popularity really knows no limits," he grumbled.

"Huh? Did you say something, General Dion?"

"No, it's nothing. I was just marveling at Her Majesty's influence," he joked. It earned him a snicker from the head of the Ebony Moon Ministry, Ruby Etoile Redmoon. Her back was held perfectly straight.

"So, um...we'll have the imperial guard and Empress Guard dealing with her protection, correct?" asked Dion.

Ruby responded with a grin. "Yes. However, there's been some issues arising on-site, so I was hoping we could discuss those today. But as this is a day of celebration, let's finish things up a bit early."

A day of celebration? I do think my wife was all excited about something but...what exactly is happening today?

For a moment, Dion was lost in thought.

"Um, General Dion?"

That voice suddenly jolted him back to reality. He still wasn't used to that moniker, and for a moment, it brought a scene back to his mind.

"Oh. Now I get it..."

“Um, get what?” asked the young officer.

Dion dismissed him. “No, I... I just realized that I can no longer tell her that’s not what I’m called.”

“Uh...”

Dion ignored the confused young officer and smiled. It’s rare that he wore a cheerful grin, but this smile was undoubtedly one of them.

Elise Littstein—The Inherited *Princess Chronicles*

“Princess Mia’s Festival of Debauchery... It was an extravaganza for the Empire’s history books. The whole nation disregarded their work and came together to celebrate the birthday of their beloved princess, participating in a festive parade. It was just as if...”

Having written that far, Elise Littstein took a pause to groan. “This isn’t quite what I was going for... If I don’t add a bit more glamor and splendor to my writing, I won’t be able to convey how enthusiastic everyone was. I haven’t been able to express how lovely Her Highness is either...” Reading over her work, she let out a sigh. “That day really was wonderful...”

Elise had yet to forget the fervor that engulfed the whole capital—no, the whole *empire*. Smiles overflowed from every townsperson, and both the friendly and wicked sat shoulder to shoulder to chow down on a feast as they grinned from cheek to cheek. That day, it didn’t matter what sort of relationship had been forged between any two people. It was special, and all was forgotten in a shared meal. It was fun beyond belief.

Memories of those smiles had Elise grinning. “I wonder what kind of festival is waiting for us this year...”

It might not live up to the one from the year before, but Elise was certain it would be fun nonetheless. As long as Mia would be there, she took that truth to be absolute. However, there was something else that Elise was *also* eagerly looking forward to.

“I hope she comes again this year...”

In the days leading up to Mia’s birthday festival, Elise had spent time with a girl that had accompanied Mia to Lunatear—Bel. This, too, was a precious memory for Elise.

“That really was so fun. We got to talk about so many things...”

Bel had been an excellent listener. She was rapt in attention to all of

Elise's story ideas, a smile on her face as she heard each one. Plus, she knew all about Mia, making an excellent source of knowledge for Elise. She unsparingly told her about all of Mia's grand achievements, sometimes surprising, sometimes exciting. Elise couldn't help but think that these feats needed to be recorded for the next generation, and she was currently making the effort to do just that. She planned to collect them into a single volume and publish them for the world to see, however...

"I want to hear more about Her Highness, and I want to run my ideas over with her too. I really hope she does come this year..."

Elise's eagerness was clear. Yet unfortunately, her sister returned alone.

I guess Miss Bel won't be coming this year.

She started to feel disappointed, but thought it best to first ask her sister.

"No...I don't think Miss Bel will be coming." Anne averted her eyes.

"Oh, I see... That's a shame, but I guess there's nothing I can do. There's always next year, and even when it's not winter, she'll be able to..."

"Um, Elise?" Suddenly, Anne interrupted her. Her expression was stern. "Lady Bel has gone somewhere far away. So...you won't be able to see her anymore."

"Huh...?"

Elise sensed something ominous in her words. The way she had phrased it—*she's gone far away, so you can't see her anymore*—it was just as if...

...As if she's dead...

The moment that thought occurred to her, her chest tightened. It was incredibly painful. And yet, the two hadn't spent much time together. They might have talked, but they had yet to foster a friendship. And yet...

This... This doesn't just feel like pain or sadness. It's like...a treasure entrusted to me by someone important broke, like I lost something incredibly important to me...

Elise realized she was clutching the hem of her clothes.

"Anne, do you mean...?" Elise looked at her sister as if she was clinging to her last strands of hope.

"It'll be all right," assured Anne, a soft smile on her face. "We'll be all right. It will take quite a while, I think, but Her Highness says that we will surely meet her again."

"Her Highness said that...?"

Mia was not only the Great Sage—she was the savior of the Littstein

family. Her words were worth believing. Thus, Elise let out a relieved sigh. “I... I see. If that’s what Her Highness said, then...” She muttered that phrase over and over as if reassuring herself. Then, she spoke. “Then I’ll have to write tons of stories that I can share with her when we meet again.”

Bel had said she loved Elise’s stories. And to share the best stories she could write, she’d need to...

“I’ll have to do my best...”

With that, she got back to work, struggling ever forward.

We now find ourselves in the far future, in the promised day of bliss when many of Mia’s Birthday Festivals have come and passed.

That day, Elise was in the library in the Whitemoon Palace. She had come to reference the books she needed for her manuscript of *The Poor Prince and the Golden Dragon: Beyond Death’s Desert*.

“I wonder what a desert’s really like though. I wish I could visit one...”

With that, she closed her eyes, and a sea of sand appeared before her. For as far as her eye could see, the world was only white sand, the blue sky, and the burning sun. But there was a pair making their way through the sandy slopes—a prince robed in the dress of the desert people, and a large dragon.

“Is there truly a village ahead?”

“There was the last time I visited. But that was almost a century ago.”

The prince met the dragon’s smugness with—

Elise was completely immersed in the world of her story, but a voice suddenly pulled her out of it.

“Oh, Elise. So this is where you were.”

Opening her eyes, Elise found her sister Anne approaching her. She seemed slightly more panicked than usual. As head maid and Her Imperial Majesty’s personal attendant, it was rare to hear the disheveled clacking of her heels.

“Is something the matter, Anne?”

“It’s almost time. I came to get you.”

“Huh? Already...?”

Elise blinked in surprise, but Anne simply gestured toward the hallway. At some point, the sunlight trickling inside had been dyed red by the sunset.

"It seems like you're making good progress."

"Hee hee... Well, I suppose..."

With a stretch and a groan, Elise took to her feet, returning the books she had borrowed back to their bookshelves...except for one—a single volume of a half-written manuscript.

"You don't need to return that one?" asked Anne.

"Oh, nope. Not this." With that, Elise brought the book close to her chest. It had been written for *her*. It was a strange volume—half filled with letters, the other half left blank. Elise followed Anne out into the hallway and began to think. *I guess it will be quite a while before she'll be able to read it...and it will probably be much, much longer until it's completed. She has yet to be born, after all.*

Elise stroked the book's cover with a giggle. There was written *The Chronicles of Miabel: The Princess Who Traversed Time*. Empress Mia herself had instructed Elise to write it.

"Tee hee! Her Majesty loves to dote more than I would have thought! To think she'd have me write a *Princess Chronicles* for her granddaughter..."

To Elise, it was all giggles. She was completely unaware of the *darker* thoughts that inspired Mia.

"Oho! If Bel has a *Princess Chronicles* written about her, she'll understand *exactly* what it feels like... Oh! I should have Elise exaggerate it the same way Bel did for *me*. I'll have Elise write that she was born into the world glittering with light..."

Yes, Elise had no way of knowing what was going on behind her back. At Mia's roundabout request of, "Why don't you write about how Bel is so cute that she's glowed since the day she was born," Miabel's *Princess Chronicles* grew only more preposterous. In any case...

After a long time, the writing of *The Chronicles of Miabel* could begin again. For that day, Princess Miabel was born.

Rania Tafrif Perujin—The Great Sage's Miscalculation

That summer was special for Rania Tafrif Perujin, for the princess of Tearmoon had visited Perujin Agricultural Country. Together, they had

climbed the golden slope, and together, they had all danced at the Thanksharvest Festival. For Perujin, it was a watershed later to be known as their "coming of dawn." That summer left an indelible mark on Rania's heart, but she returned to Saint-Noel disheartened, for Mia—the dear friend she had been eagerly waiting to meet—was absent. After visiting Perujin, Mia had continued her journey into Sunkland and the Equestrian Kingdom, making the trip drag on.

"I bet she's off again making all sorts of connections."

She had done just that in Perujin as well as Saint-Noel. Thus, Rania was certain that Mia would continue to make more and more friends as she continued her fun and exciting journey. It had Rania feeling jealous, but once Mia had finally returned to Saint-Noel, Rania couldn't help but think something was off—Mia seemed to be in poor spirits. Remembering that she had seen Mia acting similarly the previous autumn, she decided to take some of Perujin's newest confection, sugar-coated Perujin chestnuts, to Mia's room for a visit.

"I'm glad to see you're back, Princess Mia."

"Oh, Rania. I'm glad to see you as well."

Despite Mia's greeting, her face was lifeless. Rania handed over the snacks, yet still...

"My, these look marvelous... Well then, I might as well dig in."

And dig in Mia did. She seemed to truly, *really*, be enjoying the sweets. However, unlike usual, Mia did not go for seconds. After briefly drinking her tea and partaking in the confectionary, Mia let out a small sigh; it was clear that something was the matter. Being loath to silence, Rania looked around the room.

"I see Bel didn't return with you."

Both Anne and Mia's beds had signs of recent use, but Bel's bed alone, pushed into a corner, appeared to have been abandoned. Rania imagined the girl who was always there sleeping and couldn't help but smile.

"If you'd like, I would love to have you at the Thanksharvest Festival again. Of course, that offer extends to Bel as well."

That day was fun beyond belief, and it now held a special place in Rania's heart. She hoped it was the same for Mia and Bel too, but...after hearing those words, Mia's face began to cloud over.

"Oh...yes. That's right. I would love to visit again. Perujin is a very

important country, and they have so many tasty treats to offer...but...” Mia’s eyes began to close as if she was looking at something far off in the distance. “I think it will be difficult for Bel to make it. She’s gone somewhere far away...”

“Huh...?” From the expression on Mia’s face and the countenance of Anne, Rania sensed that there was more behind those words. Why was Bel not here? She was always with Mia and her friends, so why did she alone not return?

There’s no way...

She thought it impossible, that there was no way Mia would allow for such a failure. Thus, it was unthinkable that Bel had gone somewhere far away—that she had died.

Rania once again looked at Mia. She now adorned a lonesome smile. “Still, I definitely would like to attend the Thanksharvest Festival again. I had an amazing time... Oho! This summer really was full of fun. Dancing with everyone really was marvelous...”

Hearing Mia mutter those words, Rania got the vague sense that the friend before her had forever lost someone she held dear.

Just as that thought passed through her mind, Mia continued. “That’s why...yes. It will be terribly far in the future, but one day, I’ll bring her with me to Perujin again. I promise.”

“Far in the future?”

Rania hung her head in confusion, which Mia...

“Yes, around the time...the two of us become grandmothers.”

...met with the mischievous grin of a child playing a prank.

We now find ourselves in the far future, in the promised day of bliss when a sweet cake makes for the perfect snack.

That day, the Queen of Perujin Agricultural Country, Rania Tafrif Perujin, hurried along her journey to Lunatear, leisurely watching the scenery as she bobbed up and down in her carriage.

“Tearmoon really never changes. Or rather, it’s only grown even more prosperous ever since Empress Mia began her reign.”

Pleased with the developments of her dear friend’s empire, Rania couldn’t help but give a kind smile unthinkable for her at the time she had

first met Mia as students at Saint-Noel.

"Um, Your Majesty? Is this truly what you want to present as your gift?" Rania's accompanying attendant furrowed her brow as she glared at the carriage that followed behind them.

"My, don't say that. You shouldn't speak ill of the present I took such time to prepare." With that, Rania also glanced behind them. The carriage was filled with their finest sweets, from the fruits they had cultivated, to manufactured honey-dipped treats, and they were all for the celebration at hand—the birth of a new princess of Tearmoon, Empress Mia's granddaughter.

As a vassal of Tearmoon, it was only natural that Perujin provide gifts in celebration of a new member of the royal family...at least, that's how it used to be. Now, such irrationality had been done away with. Thus, there was no need for the busy Rania to make the journey to Tearmoon—it might have been the birth of a princess, but she was only the first child of the third princess.

Still, Rania had genuinely wanted to celebrate the birth from the bottom of her heart, for *she* and Perujin had already forged a bond. That day—the coming of dawn where the princesses of different kingdoms danced together—was still spoken of by the people of Perujin. However, there was another girl blissfully dancing away behind the princesses of Tearmoon and Perujin, and while Rania knew not of who she was at the time...

"In fact, I still can't quite believe it..." she muttered with a smile.

Just who *could* believe it? The notion that back then, she had danced with Mia's own granddaughter, was preposterous.

"But...coming from Empress Mia, it makes sense. I'm sure she had no idea what would follow after all that..."

After Bel had disappeared, unimaginable things happened from left to right. It was enough to leave even Mia absolutely bewildered...and yet, they were all fortuitous moments of bliss.

"Tee hee! That all really was so much fun..." Taken back into her memories, Rania couldn't help but smile.

"Um, Your Highness?" Her attendant gave her a confused glare.

Rania shook her head. "That's right, Mia was always so good at predicting the future, but she really missed *that* entirely..."

Rania stared off into the distance—Mia and her granddaughter's return

to Perujin had been *much earlier* than they had imagined...

"Tee hee! I really can't wait."

Rania grinned, dreaming about her reunion with the yet-born *her*.

Mia’s Diary of Anticipation of Their Reunion

The Fifteenth Day of the First Month

I’ve decided to start keeping a diary again. A lot has happened since Bel disappeared, but we all need to keep moving forward. I plan on keeping this diary until the day we meet again. I’ll write an entry every single day so I can tell her everything once I finally get to see her.

Yup, that’s how I’m gonna write this thing!

The Sixteenth Day of the First Month

Advanced arithmetic was terribly difficult today. Anne and I were able to solve all the questions once we put our heads together, but it left me in dire need of some cake. So we spent the afternoon touring all the sweets shops in town. I hadn’t had cream puffs in forever, and they moved me deeply.

Highly recommended ☆x5

The Seventeenth Day of the First Month

Nothing of note really happened today, but I felt bad leaving things blank. So I decided to write about what I ate today.

Dinner was ambermoon tomato stew. It was a bit sweeter than what the chef back at the palace prepares, but it was just as sour. This was also a fine rendition.

Recommended ☆x3

The Eighteenth Day of the First Month

Today’s dinner was mashed potatoes that were rolled into circles and fried. Once you put them in your mouth, they just fell apart. They were incredibly scrumptious, but if you coated them in a fruit sauce, it mellowed the bite of the oil and left a refreshing aftertaste. The combination was

ingenious.

Recommended ✰x5

Nineteenth Day of the First Month

This really is quite strange. For some reason, this is just a diary of all the foods I've eaten again! I sound like a glutton! Writing about food is fine on days when nothing important happens, but if that's all I write about, I'll never be able to show this to Bel! I've got to make sure I'm keeping a proper diary.

But well, there really was nothing important that happened today, so I suppose I'll write about food again...

Twenty-second Day of the First Month

Three whole days passed without me noticing. Time really just seems to be flying by lately.

Anyways, Miss Rafina invited me for a tea party. Rania and Tiona were there too, so it was quite the lively group. Even Rina showed her face...though it was just for a little while. I hope she continues to recover...

Anyways, the tea cakes were covered in fluffy cream! It was incredibly sweet and simply melted in the mouth! It was marvelous, and the strawberries on top added a tang that made for an excellent combination.

Incredibly Recommended ✰x5+

...But really, just how many years will it take for us to meet again? It might be too hard to write everything down for so long. Perhaps I should continue writing but not stick to it every day...if I wrote every other day, I could take breaks sometimes! Yup, I should destress for a bit so I can make sure I can keep at this.

Tenth Day of the Second Month

How peculiar. The date seems to have flown into the future. I thought I had kept writing until just yesterday, so just what is this...? Maybe this diary is magical like my blood-soaked one, where the entries are written and unwritten by themselves. Still, writing a diary every day really is hard work...

Augh! I hope I get to see Bel again soon...

Afterword: “Fin”...or Not!

It’s been a while, everyone. I’m Mochitsuki. I hope you’ve all been well.

When I was in elementary school, I was a big fan of a TV show that showcased video games. One day, there was a game that really stuck with me. I no longer remember the name, but once the credits had rolled and the letters “Fin” had appeared on-screen...one of the characters kicked the letters away, letting the player know there was still more to play!

This might have become a cliché, but back then, it really shocked me. It left my heart pumping. Right when you think the game you were enjoying is over, just as you’re getting all glum that there’s no more left to play...the characters let you know that this isn’t the end! I really think it’s an admirable production and so...that’s how *Tearmoon Empire: Volume 11* ends. The curtain seemed to have closed, but Mia just flung those three letters away. It seems like the story still has a little left to tell.

But anyways, *Tearmoon Empire* will be getting an anime adaptation! Between that, the stage play, and the drama CDs, it feels that *Tearmoon* has come a really long way. This is all thanks to you all for cheering me on for so long. Thank you!

Mia: “Huh...? What’s an ‘anime adaptation’?”

Ludwig: “Yes, um...an ‘anime adaptation,’ in other words, is such and such a thing that...”

Mia: “Hm... I don’t quite understand. Still, I’m sure I’ll look incredibly beautiful and charming walking around.”

Ludwig: “I hear that there will be a guillotine with legs running about as well. I am absolutely intrigued to discover what that might be.”

Mia: “Wh-What?! Is this a horror movie? I-I will absolutely *not* be appearing in something so scary!”

Ludwig: “So you’re aware of horror movies, then...”

Now for some words of appreciation.

Thank you, Gilse, for your wonderful illustrations. The cover for this volume is amazing, and you can really feel the movement in the inside illustration.

Thank you to my editor, F, who is always looking out for me. I hope to continue working with you in the future.

Thank you to my family for their continuous support.

And finally, thank you to my readers for sticking with me for so long. Mia's journey continues, so I hope you will all continue to cheer her on.

BLOOPER
SHIIIIINE
HUH?!
COULD THIS LIGHT BE...?
THAT'S...?
...THE SAME PALE GOLD HAIR THAT I HAVE! THIS HAS TO BE...
BE-
HUH?! WHO ARE YOU?
BA BAM!
BEL?!
IT'S BEEN A WHILE, GRAN-MISS MIA!
Tearmoon Empire
Vol.11
THANK YOU FOR PURCHASING THE BOOK!
Mizu Morino

Tearmoon Empire

Mia

Character Interview – 01

Q **What would you want for your last meal?**

A That is quite the loaded question. Hm... This will be the last meal I eat my whole life, right? In which case... Well, first, ambermoon tomato stew is a must. I'll have that as my appetizer, but I also can't go without freshly baked bread and butter from the Equestrian Kingdom. Oh! Instead of bread, I should replace it with tahkoes from Perujin. For my main course, I'd have beef steak from Sunkland, and I absolutely can't forget about mushroom stew! Oho! I'd have a tough time eating all of this in a single day...but I think I could digest it all if I had about a week. Huh? Are you listening to me?

Your favorite foods?	Rabbit stew, anything with mushrooms, castilla, vegetable cake, ambermoon tomato stew, etc.
Anything you hate?	Guillotines. I hate them all.
What are you good at?	Dancing, horseback riding, and swimming (especially the Flotsam).
What would you be reborn as?	A wild horse so I can spend all my time munching on grass.
How do you spend your free time?	Lying in bed and reading.
The best thing that's happened to you?	My diary disappearing.
Any regrets?	I ate all my cookies yesterday. I should have saved some for today.
Your favorite mushroom?	All of them. All mushrooms reign equally supreme.

Princess of the Tearmoon Empire

Mia's Comment

I'M UP FIRST! ...HUH? AREN'T MY QUESTIONS A BIT DIFFERENT FROM EVERYONE ELSE'S?

Tearmoon Empire

Anne

Character
Interview – 02

Q **Could you share any special memories you have with Princess Mia?**

A Shortly after enrolling in Saint-Noel Academy, we shared a bath together. There, she showed me kindness and washed my back.
Besides that, I suppose the most memorable is my first meeting with milady. I had toppled over her cake, yet she addressed me very kindly. I can't forget either of those moments.

Your favorite foods?	The ice candy I shared with my family and milady.
Anything you hate?	Anyone who would show rudeness to milady.
What are you good at?	Giving romance advice.
What would you be reborn as?	I'd like to be reborn as Ludwig so I can dedicate brains to milady.
How do you spend your free time?	Learning skills to help me be a better maid and networking.
The best thing that's happened to you?	When milady called me her right hand and confidante in the baths.
Any regrets?	That I didn't practice cooking when I was younger.
Your taste in men?	Those who have themselves together.

Mia's personal maid

Mia's Comment

WE'LL BE INTERVIEWING EVERYONE! OF COURSE, NEXT UP IS MY RIGHT HAND! ANNE IS MY GREATEST TACTICIAN IN LOVE, AND SHE'S BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR SOME OF MY BEST MANEUVERS!

Tearmoon Empire Ludwig Character Interview – 03

Q What was Her Highness's most impressive ploy?

A That is quite the difficult question. They are innumerable to the point it is difficult to choose just one. The prowess she exhibited in building a hospital in the capital's slums was extraordinary, and the courtesy she showed to orphans, building a school to offer an education to all with talent, was marvelous. However I think her best has to be the Bread-Cake Declaration, where she called for us to not only use our reserves for our own country, but to share them with those abroad. A simple mistake could have thrust the continent into a fruitless war, yet that declaration instead cemented friendly ties. It was truly a stupendous achievement befitting the name of the Great Sage.

Your favorite foods?	Anything that has roasted moonflower seeds.
Anything you hate?	Wasting tax money and haughty nobles.
Whatare you good at?	Mental math.
What would you be reborn as?	A sailor, so I can travel the world.
How do you spend your free time?	Creating homework questions.
The best thing that's happened to you?	Meeting Her Highness in the Golden Moon Ministry and being chosen to serve her.
Any regrets?	Having lost complete faith in all nobles.
Your taste in women?	Those who can find their faults and learn to look at things in a new light.

Mia's trusted official

Mia's Comment

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS...? (SHIVER)
OH, THEY'RE FOR BEL! KEEP AT IT, LUDWIG!

Tearmoon Empire

Abel

Character Interview – 04

Q **What date spot with Princess Mia has stuck with you the most?**

A Hm... Stargazing on the rough before confronting my sister has certainly left a mark on my memory. However...I think I would have to choose the deserted island. There, I once again saw how Mia was not just some sheltered noble lady in need of protection, but I also learned she was just a young woman in need of support. It's why I want to support her so much. That being said, it may be difficult to qualify this as a date.

Your favorite foods?	Horse-shaped bread.
Anything you hate?	Those who are rude to ladies.
What are you good at?	Swordsmanship and horsemanship.
What would you be reborn as?	I don't think I would be an upstanding person if I were reborn, so I hope I never am.
How do you spend your free time?	Training my skills in swordsmanship and horsemanship. I've also been reading books Mia recommends lately.
The best thing that's happened to you?	The first time Mia asked me to dance.
Any regrets?	The time I spent shackled by defeat and giving up.
Your taste in women?	Mia.

Second Prince of the Kingdom of Remno

Mia's Comment

ABEL...YOU'RE SO DREAMY...

Tearmoon Empire

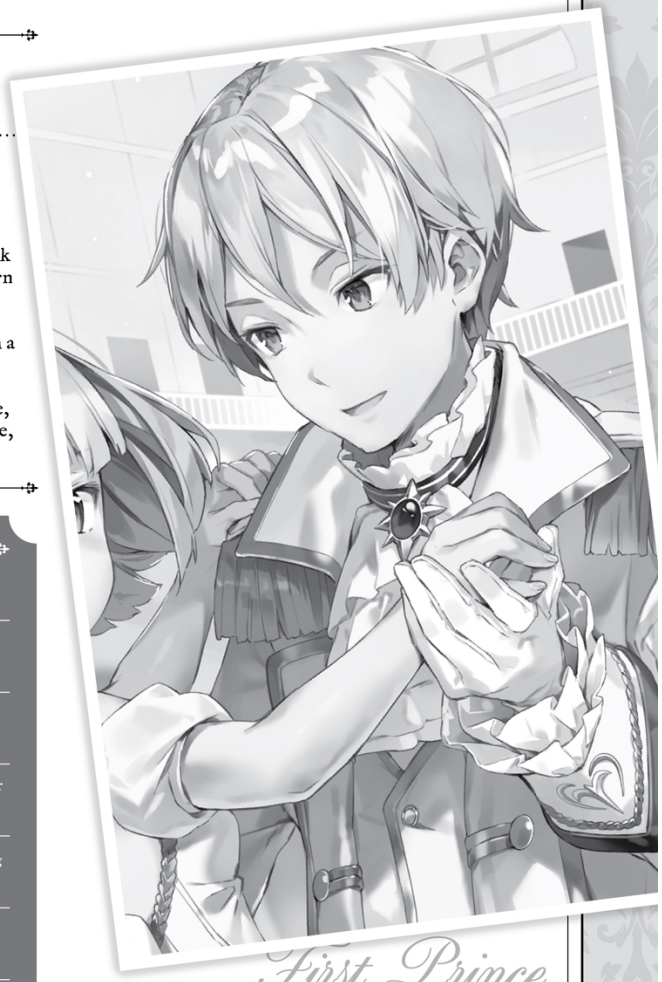
Sion

Character Interview – 05

Q **What do you typically discuss with Tiona?**

A The two of us both have younger brothers, so we often talk about our siblings, our families, or the people in our domains. Rudolvon Outcount County has especially close ties with its people, and I think it serves as an example that I have much to learn from. Each of our discussions inspires me to think about how to rule fairly or other kingly tasks—just how am I to bear the weight of such a heavy burden? But whenever I discuss these things with her, I get the oddest sense of déjà vu. It's as if we've had these discussions before, yet... No, that would be impossible. In any case, I enjoy our talks together.

Your favorite foods?	Horse-shaped bread.
Anything you hate?	Nobles and others in power who make light of their duties.
What are you good at?	Swordsmanship, dancing, horsemanship, swimming, studies, art, etc.
What would you be reborn as?	I'd like to be reborn as a commoner and live a life devoted only to my beloved family.
How do you spend your free time?	Observing the lives of the people, practicing swordsmanship or horsemanship, or playing board games with Keithwood.
The best thing that's happened to you?	Meeting all these people who are worthy of respect at Saint-Noel.
Any regrets?	Not having had a proper discussion with Echard earlier.
Your taste in women?	Those who view me as a simple man.



First Prince of the Kingdom of Sunkland

Mia's Comment

URGH... HE'S GOT SO MANY TALENTS...
HE'S TOO PERFECT! IT'S NO FUN AT ALL!

Tearmoon Empire

Keithwood

Character Interview – 06

Sion's faithful butler

Q **What is your favorite food prepared by Mia?**

A That would undoubtedly be sandwiches. Everything else is completely out of the question. In fact, sandwiches are so much the only answer that I would absolutely never want her to prepare anything else for me. If I had to say something else...maybe anything that was simple enough to not require too much work. Perhaps a salad, as long as there are no mushrooms? A mushroom salad would be disastrous. Or maybe scrambled eggs? No...having to cook would be too much for her, so it'd have to be something raw. Hm...

Your favorite foods?	The soft bread I had when I was taken in by the king.
Anything you hate?	Corrupt nobles, those who think poorly of milord, all mushrooms, and rare meat.
What are you good at?	Swordsmanship, horsemanship, martial arts, or any skill needed in battle. I'm also good with words and skilled at dancing.
What would you be reborn as?	I'd like to be reborn as a selfish princess who causes trouble for her faithful servants (evil grin).
How do you spend your free time?	I spend it with milord. I occasionally cook for myself as well.
The best thing that's happened to you?	When I became needed as milord's butler.
Any regrets?	The first time I helped Princess Mia cook. I shouldn't have made it a success.
Your taste in women?	Those who aren't needy and can handle themselves. It's also best if they're open-minded.

Mia's Comment

KEITHWOOD IS ALMOST AS PERFECT AS SION! BUT IT SEEMS LIKE HE HAS A DARK SIDE TO HIM. I SHOULD WARN BEL...

Tearmoon Empire

Tiona

Character Interview – 07

Q **What's your taste in men?**

A I suppose the type who face their responsibilities faithfully from head-on. I've heard that Cyril is doing everything he can for the task Her Highness has assigned him, and I am incredibly pleased.

Q **I see. By the way, what are your thoughts on Princess Arsha?**

A Hm...? I think she's a wonderful woman, but why do you ask?

Q **Oh, um... I'm just glad that's what you think!**

Your favorite foods?	The horse-shaped bread we all made together.
Anything you hate?	Haughty Tearmoon nobles.
What are you good at?	Archery, swordsmanship, dance, and studies. But I'm especially skilled with a bow.
What would you be reborn as?	I want to be reborn as a younger sister so I can be spoiled by my older sibling.
How do you spend your free time?	I practice the sword or bow. I also study manners.
The best thing that's happened to you?	When Her Highness said I was one of her beloved subjects.
Any regrets?	The fact I couldn't be by Her Highness's side when she lost Bel.
Your taste in men?	Honest men who do not run from their responsibilities.

Outcount's daughter

Mia's Comment

WE USED TO BE MORTAL ENEMIES, BUT NOW WE'RE FRIENDS! I HOPE I CAN FOREVER KEEP HOLD OF MY RELATIONSHIP WITH HER YOUNGER BROTHER, CYRIL, AND HER FATHER, OUTCOUNT RUDOLVON, AS WELL.

Tearmoon Empire

Bel

Character Interview – 08

Q **Please share a memory between you and your beloved grandmother.**

A Grandmother Mia often teaches me how to dance! She also helps me with my studies, but she's really strict... She asks me to do things like memorize ten whole pages at once! It's too much! She scared me into it, telling me this is what I needed to achieve the amazing feats of the Great Sage. Oh, but she has a playful side too. She always tries to take a bite out of my cake. It's really charming, and it's one of the many reasons I love my grandmother!

Your favorite foods?	Sweet hot milk.
Anything you hate?	Studying or anything that requires diligent effort.
What are you good at?	Making accessories, riding horses, dancing, and more! (At least, according to her.)
What would you be reborn as?	I'd like to be reborn as Ludwig or Galv and try being the teacher for once!
How do you spend your free time?	Reading! Adventures! Exploring!
The best thing that's happened to you?	Going back in time again and reuniting with everyone.
Any regrets?	Dying in front of Rina and accidentally hurting my best friend.
Your taste in men?	The Libra King! Keithwood the Faithful! Grandpa Abel doesn't quite live up to them, but I love him too!

Mia's granddaughter

Mia's Comment

THAT'S MY GRANDDAUGHTER! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU! BUT WHY DO I GET THIS SLIGHT SENSE OF DISAPPOINTMENT...OR FEEL LIKE SHE'S A BIT LAZY OR DITZY? SHE'S MY GRANDDAUGHTER! I'LL NEVER FEEL THAT WAY!

Bonus Short Story

Princess Miabel's Adventure! ~The Heart-Pounding Search for a Scoop in the Capital~

The granddaughter of Empress Mia Luna Tearmoon, Princess Miabel, was known for her peculiar hobby of exploring the town. Since her youngest days, she'd had a keen interest for the common folk and hopped on every opportunity to visit where they made their livings. This virtue of hers—gazing upon her people with love and affection—was considered a remnant of her grandmother's sagacity.

In any case, this is the story of just one of such escapades.

Within a room in the Whitemoon Palace, a young girl sat diligently in study. She was about ten years old, perhaps a bit younger. With a textbook in one hand, she furrowed her brow and groaned. Her "diligent" studying...was all pretend.

She glanced at the door, tilting her head ever so slightly, and focused her ears into the hall. She heard...nothing. Stealthily, she lifted herself from the chair and crept toward the door. She boldly pressed her ears against it. She needed to make sure...and luckily, she heard nothing!

She now moved swiftly. Suddenly, she ripped off her lavish dress and changed into a shirt and pants, an outfit she had prepared for traversing the forest. Anyone with a keen eye would have noticed that her clothes were of quality, but on a single glance, they seemed to be the attire of a commoner.

She adorned a hat and gave a satisfied nod. "Tee hee! I've got the perfect disguise!"

The girl—Princess Miabel Luna Tearmoon (aka Bel)—was currently trying to escape the palace. Her instructor, Chancellor Ludwig Hewitt, was a terribly busy man. Thus, there were times he would slip out for a talk in the midst of their lessons. Bel was perfectly aware of this, and so she used it as an opportunity to open the door and...*not* slip out! She was no novice.

She knew that such an obvious route was not fit for her escape. She was well aware of all the hidden passages that lay within the castle.

“Um...so if I go deep inside the dresser...” she muttered, finding her way deeper and deeper inside. She pushed aside the thick coats, and at the end of the wall near the floor...there was a hole! Even a child would need to crawl on their hands and knees to fit inside, but she stuck in her head and pushed her way in.

The passage was situated between two walls—an unexpected route formed by various repairs and improvements the palace had undergone. Passing behind the castle walls, Bel came to a corner. She happily broke into a skip as she made her way out of the castle, when...

“Just where do you think you’re going, Your Highness?”

...a voice suddenly called out from behind her. Startled, Bel jumped into the air. Then, she slowly turned behind her. All the strength left her body; she knew this castle guard.

“Oh, Mr. Ogen! You surprised me...”

Ogen was an older man, a master soldier who had worked at the palace ever since Empress Mia was young. His sight must have begun to leave him, for he wore a simple pair of glasses. Even after having left the forefront of the Empress Guard, he had still been entrusted with the protection of Mia’s family. He was a loyal soldier deeply trusted by the empress, so of course, Bel was acquainted with him. In fact, for some inexplicable reason, she felt an affection toward him that went beyond acquaintanceship...

“Actually, I was headed outside the castle...”

Ogen responded with a stern shake of his head. “We cannot have that, Your Highness. You are a princess, and thus, you cannot just head outside whenever you please. Do keep that in mind...”

Bel gave a meek nod. “I’m well aware of that. As a princess who has inherited the blood of the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, I cannot simply go out to play. Grandmother Mia told me that I need to carefully observe how the townspeople live! That’s why I’m heading out to town to see it for myself.” Her facade of diligence quickly changed into a genuine expression of triumph. “I’m going to go out in the capital to see all the places Grandmother Mia made with my own two eyes!”

She puffed out her chest, borrowing the grandeur of her grandmother.

Really, just who did she get this from...?

Ogen scowled, and yet...

“I see. Yes, there may be a need for such.”

A calm and dignified voice recognized the truth of Bel’s words. She turned toward the source, finding another bespectacled elderly man.

“Chancellor...just what brings you here?” asked Ogen.

“Well, my pupil disappeared in the middle of her studies.” With a wry smile, Ludwig looked toward Bel. A shiver ran down her back, and she jumped. “Still, it is true that speaking to the townsfolk is an important job in itself...and luckily, the capital has become quite stable. With four or five guards in tow, it should not prove a problem.”

He crossed his arms as he spoke. If Mia had borne witness, she would have bitterly grumbled, “Why are you only nice to Bel?!”

“Sir Ludwig, but...” Ogen went to rebuttal, but he was met with a nostalgic gaze from the Chancellor.

“Does this not take you back, Sir Ogen?”

“Take me back? To when, sir...?”

“To when the empress was still the princess. One day, she suddenly announced that she would be visiting the Newmoon District. I believe we had your aid that day.”

With that, a serene smile appeared on Ogen’s face as well. “Ah...yes, I do remember. I could never forget. It was just myself and a few others of the royal guard. Those were excellent times...”

Their talk set Bel’s eyes sparkling. “The Newmoon District! That’s where a lot of Grandmother Mia’s passionate fans have gathered! I heard there’s a hospital that she built there! Oh, and isn’t there an orphanage associated with Saint Mia Academy there too?”

At Bel’s triumphant display of her paltry knowledge, Ludwig gave a firm nod. “Yes, the two of us were witness to the impetus of those very events.” He pushed up his glasses. “This is indeed a good opportunity. We will conduct the rest of your studies in the field today and learn about Her Imperial Majesty’s great achievements.”

Thus, under the auspices of Ludwig, Bel’s adventure in the capital began.

“Really, the chancellor should have let me know of this sooner,”

grumbled Lynsha, Bel's wet nurse and caretaker. She adjusted her fashionable glasses with a deep sigh.

Besides preparing guards, Ludwig had thought it was best to inform her as well, but...it only left her bubbling in anger. He gave a wry smile.

That is right; Lynsha has been long acquainted with Miss Bel as well...

Lost in his emotions, Ludwig gave a deep bow. "My deepest apologies. If I am to be allowed an excuse, Miss Bel has inherited Her Majesty's tenacity..."

"Well, I can't deny that..." Lynsha was still not ready to assent to these plans. She must have been pushed around by the girl time and time again.

But then Bel spoke up, despite having shown no interest in their conversation. "Tee hee! So, the Newmoon District must be full of people and really fun!" She giggled, beginning to skip around. Lynsha couldn't help but put on an exasperated smile. At the end of the day, both these adults had a huge soft spot for the girl.

Lunatear's most bustling shopping center, the Newmoon District, was as bustling as always. Life filled the eyes of all who walked the streets and smiles adorned merchants as they called out to customers.

"Just walking around is so much fun! Just as expected from a special economic zone assisted by Grandmother Mia herself! Ah!" Bel let out a cheer, running off as Lynsha rushed to catch her. She followed Bel's gaze to determine what had grabbed her attention.

"Oh, Miacakes..." she muttered.

There was a stall set up by the roadside selling pastries in the shape of a dress-adorning princess. They were known as Miacakes and had become a specialty of the Newmoon District. Lynsha quickly left to buy one to bring back for Bel. In the most natural of gestures, she split the cake in half and took a bite. She was testing it for poison. There was no being too careful. Despite her...*questionable*...attitude, Bel was a princess. The granddaughter of Empress Mia of the Tearmoon Empire—nay, Mia's prowess extended the whole continent. Lynsha could afford no mistakes. After making sure there was nothing wrong with the bread, she handed over the remaining half to Bel. She was equally natural in the way she took it, tossing it into her mouth with a grin.

"Tee hee! I love Miacakes!" Bel chomped and chomped away, looking to be in complete bliss.

Lynsha sighed in exasperation. “You’re stuffing your mouth! That’s not becoming of a princess, Miss Bel.”

After an audible *gulp!*, Bel began to laugh. “But this is the tastiest way to eat it!” Bel seemed to not care at all.

“Really, now... Empress Mia will get mad at you. Actually...I doubt that.”

“Indeed. Her Imperial Majesty will absolutely forgive her with a laugh. In fact...she may just try it out for herself.” With that, Ludwig glanced at the stall. His glasses sparkled in the sunlight. “Her Majesty is a magnanimous one. Unless it be something major, she is not one to lose her temper. The Miacakes prove such.”

Lynsha looked at the pastry in her hand. “Yes, you’re right. They have quite a questionable name. It is just like Empress Mia to turn a blind eye.”

“Even should the common folk act insolent, if it comes from a place of love, Her Imperial Majesty will accept it with no complaint. Miacakes becoming a famous food of the capital is the result of that, and it is all thanks to her magnanimity. If it’s for the sake of commerce, she will turn a blind eye to any slight discourtesies. She truly amazes me.”

Ogen responded with an earnest nod. “She truly does. That must be what earns her so much respect.”

Their awe had passed over to Bel, as she began to skip around and laugh.

But then, she fell. “Eek!”

Lynsha rushed over and picked her up. “Your Highness! You have to keep your eyes in front of you! Are you hurt?”

Bel responded with a wry smile. “Hee hee! I kind of scraped myself...” She stood up, revealing...a red spot on her young knee, just as she had confessed!

“Th-This is terrible!” Ogen cried. The blood flushed from his face. “My deepest apologies, Your Highness. Please be careful to not move your leg as much as possible.” The moment those words left his mouth, he began to lift her into the air.

“Huh? Huuuh? I’m fine, Mr. Ogen! You don’t need to panic so much! It’s just a scrape...” stated Bel, flustered. At her core, Bel was not one to be concerned with simple scrapes and boo-boos. Running around outside inevitably leads to falls, and sometimes scrapes. She wasn’t one to put her

playing on hold over fears of a minor injury. It was incredibly unnoble-like of her, instead the sensibility of a commoner, but it was just her nature. There were stories of her unprincess-like words, perhaps spoken, perhaps unspoken... “It’s okay! All it needs is some spit on it!”

Still, her retinue could not remain silent. “This isn’t just a scrape! This is terrible! Just the thought of a scarred leg on a princess is...” Ogen was in shambles, but Ludwig instead simply adorned a bitter smile.

“Sir Ogen, this is no major injury. I do not believe it will leave a scar. Besides, there are many stories that remain of Empress Mia’s heroic escapades from her younger days.”

Lynsha nodded. “I first met Her Majesty in a hideout of Remno revolutionaries. She told me she had fallen into a river or something...”

“Oh! I know that story!” This epic tale of her beloved grandmother had Bel’s eyes sparking.

“I’ve also heard she was once shipwrecked on a deserted island. In comparison, this is nothing...”

“Huh? I don’t know that one!”

Ludwig met Bel’s curiosity with a nudge of his glasses. “Indeed. It was right in the middle of her teenage years, I believe... She had been invited by the daughter of Duke Greenmoon on a cruise in the Galilea Sea.”

“Hm...? What’s the Galilea Sea?” Bel hung her head in confusion.

Lynsha, on the other hand, was pushing her hand against her temple as if trying to hold back a headache. “You know about Ganudos Port Country, right, Your Highness?”

It wasn’t just Lynsha—Ludwig’s eyes were starting to take on a sharp edge as well. Bel gave a big gulp. “Of... Of course I know! It’s, um...that way, right?”

It should be noted that from Lunatear, Ganudos was located to the west. Bel’s finger was pointed more toward...south-southwest. But still...

“Yes...that’s right. More or less.”

“That answer was quite impressive...coming from you.”

Those in charge of her care hedged their answers. But met with their praise, Bel confidently puffed out her chest.

“In any case, the Galilea Sea is the inlet that faces Ganudos Port Country.”

“Oho!” Bel chuckled. “So you’re saying that Grandmother Mia went on

a big adventure on a deserted island there!"

Unlike Bel's dazzling curiosity, Ogen scowled. "As a guard, it fills me with fear..."

Of course, Bel paid him no mind. "Grandmother Mia really is amazing! An adventure on a deserted island...I bet she found something big! Like a pirate's buried treasure, or a temple hidden underground..." Bel's thoughts on Mia's exploits were surprisingly astute.

"Well, it is true she found something of incredibly historical importance. However, it was nothing so great." With that, Ludwig kneeled in front of Bel. "But enough with that. It appears that your injury really is nothing major, Your Highness. Yet you are still a princess of great import. Let's bring you to a hospital to have it sterilized to be safe."

"Huh? A hospital...?" A frown suddenly appeared on Bel's face. No children were fond of doctors, and Bel was no exception. While she could handle a scrape with ease, she could not stand the pain that came with disinfectant.

"Yes, a hospital. Built by Her Majesty herself."

Bel's expression flip-flopped. "A hospital that Grandmother Mia built?! *The* hospital that she built! Let's go!"

Still, what Bel *was* fond of was following in the glorious steps of her grandmother.

Said hospital—Hairpin Hospital—stood in the center of the Newmoon District, named after the fact that a precious hairpin donated by Mia herself had paid for the facility. It had undergone various renovations since its founding, allowing for a wide scope of services to be offered here. In fact, it was known as the best hospital in Lunatear thanks to its affiliation with Saint Mia Academy and the continent-wide Mianet.

On the first floor of this very building, Ludwig found a familiar face—a woman clad in a white robe and an amicable smile. Her hair was cropped short just as it had been when she was a young girl, and her cheeks were a healthy rose-color. Behind the glint of her glasses, her eyes sparkled with intellectual acuity.

"Lady Tatiana. I was not aware that you were in the capital."

Looking shocked, she turned behind her. "Oh goodness...it's been quite the while, Mr. Ludwig." After a perfectly postured bow, she frowned. "Is

Her Majesty well?"

"Yes, thanks to you. Though I do hear she has the habit of overeating..."

"Mm-hmm..." she scowled, adjusting her glasses.

Seeing her expression, Ludwig moved to explain himself in half-panic. "In most cases, it only happens on days after she has been incredibly busy, or those that leave her famished."

"I see...if that's all it is, then I guess all is well... She is quite important. It would be a disaster if anything were to happen to her..."

Seeing her serious expression, Ludwig nodded in agreement.

"Just what brings you here today?" asked Tatiana.

"Oh, yes. Her Highness Miabel tripped while we were in town. I brought her here thinking it best to disinfect the wound."

"Her Highness Miabel...?" For a moment, Tatiana was shocked. Overwhelmed with emotion, she looked at Bel. But before Bel could ask what had come over Tatiana, the emotion had vanished, leaving only a curiously nostalgic grin. "I see... Her knee does indeed appear to be scraped. Well then, follow me."

"Um!" Bel stopped her. "Could you be *the* Tatiana? The one in charge of the medical division of the Mianet?"

The Mianet—a transnational powerhouse said to have eliminated famine and plague from the entire continent. Ever since she was young, Bel had heard time and time again that this was amongst the greatest of her grandmother's many achievements. So of course, she also knew the four people who served as the organizations' cornerstones. One was Mia's friend and a noble of Perujin Agricultural Country—Rania. Then there was the daughter of the head of Forkroad & Co., the Mianet's representative, and friend of Mia—Chloe. Another yet was the younger brother of Libra King Sion and son-in-law to the Greenmoons, the strongest of Tearmoon's Four Dukes—Echard, who was in charge of negotiations.

And the last of these was in charge of the medical division. She was...

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Princess Miabel. I am Tatiana, the head of the Mianet's medical division." She took a knee in perfect manner.

It had Miabel's eyes sparkling. "It's nice to meet you! I'm Miabel Luna Tearmoon. If you have time, I'd love to hear all your stories, Miss Tatiana!"

Yes, those were the words that left her lips.

Now then, while the sting of the disinfectant might have brought tears to her eyes, her reward of getting to hear the great tales of her grandmother had her in a full-face grin.

"Since you came all the way here, why don't you talk with the priest from the church next door as well?" suggested Tatiana.

"There's a church next door?"

"Yes. It also served as a hospital until this facility was built. The first students of Saint Mia Academy were also from its orphanage."

"You mean the famous...?" Bel turned toward Ludwig, who nodded.

"Yes, it is the church you believe it to be. Her Majesty visited it during her first trip to the Newmoon District."

"Then I have to go!" she beamed as they left the hospital. Then, she found something peculiar before the church. "Oh! Look at that statue! That's...!"

Not having learned her lesson, she dashed forward. Luckily, Lynsha was able to grab her by the collar. "Miss Bel...let's walk *calmly*, okay?"

Her glare sent a shiver down Bel's spine. Calm and composed as a princess, she approached the statue. "Like I thought! It *is* Grandmother Mia!" she yelled in a way that was *not* calm and composed as a princess. "Is this...wood? It's rainbow-colored. How weird!"

"This statue of Empress Mia is made from wood donated by the Lulu tribe," called out a voice. Turning behind her, Bel found a bespectacled priest. "Most rulers would erect tacky statues to display their affluence and power. These are typically made out of glimmering gold, and to be truthful, there was talk of building such a statue for Her Imperial Majesty. However...she was opposed. She demanded that a smaller statue made of wood donated with pure intentions be built instead." The priest put on a composed grin. "Your grandmother is not one to exaggerate her honors."

With that, he exchanged a proper greeting with Bel's retinue and led them inside. The church was built as an orphanage, but there were few children inside—only two or three young ones inside a tidy room. A few nuns attended to them, but noticing Bel and the others, they gave a nervous bow.

"There are so few here," Lynsha wondered aloud.

The priest responded with a gentle grin. "When the children come of

age, they are sent to live in the dorms of Saint Mia Academy. Thus, there are few living in the orphanage. Plus, the number of kids who fall into unfortunate circumstances has lessened since Her Majesty began her reign."

Ludwig nodded, looking somewhat proud. "Take a good look, Miss Bel. The absence of children here is all thanks to Her Imperial Majesty's deep intellect."

Thanks to the Mianet, there were fewer children who lost their parents to plague or famine. As Ludwig always said, free welfare facilities were proof of peace.

Grandmother Mia really is so amazing...

Still in awe, Bel was led to the drawing room, where she found a peculiar portrait on the wall.

"Oh! Is that Grandmother Mia?! Wait a second..." Bel was flummoxed, for what she was certain was a portrait of her grandmother, the famous Great Sage of the Empire was...

"Ah, that is a portrait of the Holy Lady Rafina left by the priest that came before me. Do you see the signature it bears? It makes it incredibly rare. And if you look here..."

The priest lost in his passion, Bel could only mutter a simple "Uh-huh..." with a forced smile as a response. The Holy Lady was a friend of her grandmother's, and she sometimes came to visit her at the Whitemoon Palace. Thus, to be completely honest...there was nothing that seemed "rare" about it. At all.

A simple thought ran through Bel's head: *Is there really a point to showing me this...?*

Perhaps the young priest noticed, for he rushed on to something else. "Oh, look here! This is even rarer. It's a portrait featuring both the Holy Lady and the Great Sage." He held out exactly that.

"Oh, you're right! Grandmother Mia and Aunty Rafina look so young!"

"Right? This portrait dates back to when Empress Mia was attending Saint-Noel. Though it is not clear what led to the two of them being depicted in the same portrait..." The priest's cheery attitude was proof that he was hurt by Bel's lack of attention. "However, *this one* is the rarest. It depicts both the Holy Lady and Empress Mia *as well* as a young girl that resembles her Imperial Majesty."

Grandmother Mia really is so amazing! Everyone loves her so much!

Bel was in for a long and boring lecture, but she bore a smile as it gracefully went from one of her ears out the other.

This was a scene from the times of peace that Mia forged herself as empress—the days that Bel lived a fulfilled life as a princess. These were the blissful days that greeted her in what became the continuation of her dream.

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 12 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Tearmoon Empire: Volume 11
by Nozomu Mochitsuki

Translated by Madeleine Willette
Edited by Samantha J. Moore

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 Nozomu Mochitsuki
Illustrations by Gilse

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by TO Books
This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Tokyo
English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: January 2024
Premium E-Book